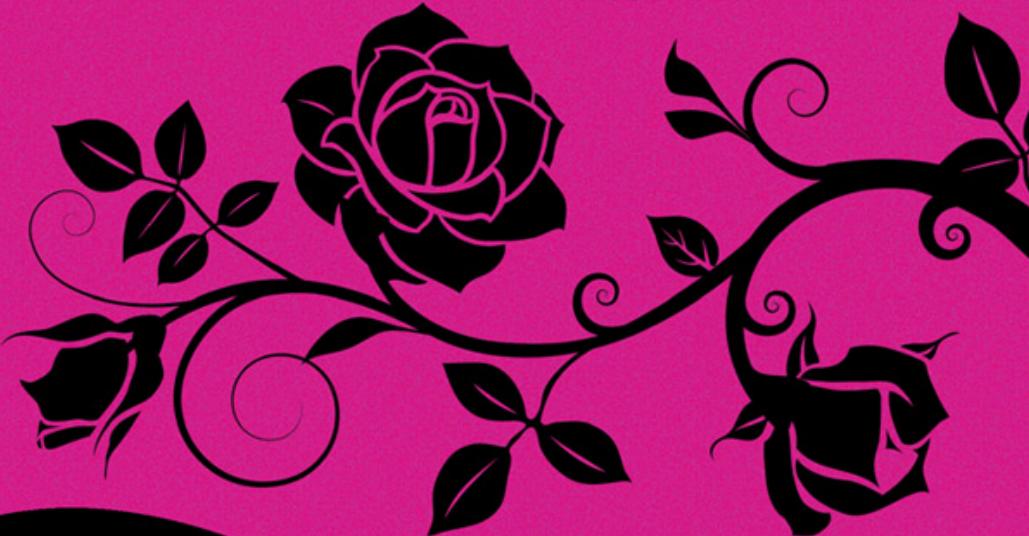


A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



AN INSPECTOR
CHARLESWORTH MYSTERY



THE ROSE IN DARKNESS
CHRISTIANNA
BRAND



The Rose in Darkness

An Inspector Charlesworth Mystery

Christianna Brand

A MysteriousPress.com
Open Road Integrated Media
Ebook

*To all my friends in America, so loving and generous and ever
kind; and so much loved in return.*

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The Cast

Vi Feather

and the ‘Eight Best Friends’ whose number in fact varied considerably—

Sari Morne,

Sofy Burnsey,

Nan Winter,

Etho Wendover,

Rufie Soames,

Charley,

‘Pony’;

and *Phin Devigne*

Among these nine people were found a victim and a murderer. There is no collusion as to this murder.

1

THE WIND SHRIEKED LIKE a demon, malignant, driving the rain before it across the sodden countryside through the starless night. Thunder and lightning seemed as one: with a crash like gunfire the heavens split open, flooding the blackness with a white flash that hung for a moment, blinding, to lose itself again in the pitchy dark. In the small Hertfordshire town as the car sped through, flooded streets and pavements gleamed wet beneath the blurred lamp-light; along the margins of the winding lanes the hedges bent all one way, yielding, resilient, to the whip of the gale. But above them, the trees creaked perilously, lashing free their branches of the still clinging leaves of an early autumn; and on the long, straight stretch that lies between Wren's Hill and the main road to London, a great elm, unsound at root and core, gave up its struggle and, with a splintering roar, toppled and fell—and lay with tossing branches, a giant in its death throes, across the narrow road.

The car came to a juddering halt, its streaming black bonnet half covered by a broken branch. Footbrake driven down almost into the floorboards, hands braced on the driving wheel, face blanched with shock, Sari Morne sat motionless and let the blessed stillness flow over her: stillness, but for the thudding of the rain on her rooftop, the high, shrill moaning of the wind...

And saw through the forest of branches, bright lights approaching, halting, focused on the fallen tree.

Her first thought was one of terror. They've realised that they'd got ahead! They've turned and come back for me!

Somehow reverse her car, flee back the way she had come?

But what if they hadn't in fact been ahead? What if, retreating, she ran full tilt into them? And she thought of a white face upturned, peering out from the rain-spattered windscreen of the following car, flick-flick, flick-flicking across its blankness—of bloody hands outflung as though to grasp at her through the impermeable glass... To stay? To go? Oh God, help me! she prayed. What shall I do?

But on the other side of the tree, a car door opened and a figure emerged and came towards her, forcing a way through the branches to the great dark trunk lying heavily across the road; and a voice called out something, words blown away by the wind—and yet with a note in them that, with a heart-stopping reassurance, she recognised.

A note of Englishness, of cool, half-humorous, public school Englishness—exasperated perhaps but still upper lip. Nothing frantic, nothing menacing, certainly nothing foreign about that only half-heard voice. Just a stranger, held helpless as she herself was held helpless, by the falling of the elm across their path.

She switched off the ignition, opened the door, staggered out into the darkness and the driving rain. The wind lifted her hat and she reached up and pulled it down, holding it with two fisted hands, so that the big brim almost met beneath her chin like a great black poke-bonnet. Forced her way as close as possible to him through the branches - on her side of the tree. Words came croaking across to her, shouted, blown away. 'Now what?'

'I must get by!' she cried and knew that her own voice was inaudible: screamed it out again, desperately, against the howling of the wind. I—must—get—by!'

For supposing they had been following behind her after

all, were to catch up with her here by the fallen tree?

The voice yelled back, blown away, drowned by the hissing of the rain, the swish of wet leaves, the crackle of snapping twigs as the great elm settled. Silhouetted against his car's headlamps she could see the tall figure, collar turned up, gloved hands gripping the brim of a dripping wet hat, as she gripped her own. 'Not a hope! Not—a—hope!'

'But I must get past,' she wailed, terrified. 'I must! I must!'

The voice called back on a note of anxiety also: 'Me too!'

And of course, all in a moment she knew what to do. Simply change cars. 'Exchange—cars?'

'What?'

'Exchange! Swap cars!'

Swap cars; and turn and go on, she to London, he to Wren's Hill or wherever he wanted to go. 'Change back—in the morning?'

She heard only snatches. He seemed to exclaim, first incredulous, then exultant. But he was not so careless, not so reckless, if you liked, as she was. 'What—make—?'

What the hell does it matter? she thought. We can change back tomorrow. Does he think I crouch all my life waiting for trees to fall, so as to pinch people's cars? What did it matter who had what kind of car? And if she lost the brand new Halcyon for ever, well, all right, what would that count against her safety, against escape from her pursuers? She shrieked, 'The new Cadmus. The Halcyon 3000.'

Voice blown away, blown away. But: 'Good lord! So have I!'

Nothing so very odd about that, it was the new car of the moment, immensely popular. 'Well, all right then. So neither of us has anything to lose.' Never mind whether or

not he heard her; she struggled back to her own car, blown and buffeted, reeling as she walked, clinging to her hat, the rain sluicing down on each side of it in sheets of silver. It took an effort to yank open the door against the tug of the wind, but she managed to lean in, grab up her handbag from the passenger seat, let the door slam shut. Nothing else in there: a rug, a few odds and ends stuffed into the glove compartment, no doubt, but she couldn't think what—the car was so new, it had had no time to get filled with the elegant clutter any car of hers usually held. He had evidently done the same, for she saw the blur of a light coat as he leaned in at his own offside front door. He came round and stood in the light of his headlamps, seemed to be hunched over something; she guessed that he was sorting a card from his wallet or writing down his address. I suppose I must do the same, she thought, and scrabbled in her bag for a piece of paper, found only a folded toilet tissue, printed laboriously with a ballpoint pen the name of her block of flats: HEATHCLIFFE HEIGHTS in groggy capitals and HAMPSTEAD. She struggled back to the tree. He met her there, bawling into the maelstrom, gesturing to his right. They moved along, one on either side of the great dark bole till she saw that by stooping and crawling, they could in fact fight a way through, under the main body of the tree where a broken branch lifted it three or four feet clear of the surface of the road. He did what he could to help her, forcing aside the smaller branches that bent and whipped back against her progress, and she emerged at last and stood, head bent against the wind to keep her hat from flying off, as she beat and scraped at the tawny leather of her coat, brushing off wet leaves and broken twigs, flicking her hands to shake away the water with a jangle of bracelets inside the cuff of her glove. 'My God, what a

night!'

'Extraordinary,' he mouthed back at her, 'having—the same—cars!'

'Yes, well....' No time for pleasantries, she longed only to be gone. She held out the paper to him, its ink already blurred by the rain. He handed in return a scrap of paper, prodded with a gloved forefinger, tan leather turned to a sludgy blackness. 'Given you—my 'phone. Get in touch—tomorrow?'

She almost snatched the paper from him, shoving it carelessly into her pocket. 'All right, yes, well, I've got to go.' If her enemies had been behind her, now they would be held up by the fallen tree. If they were ahead—if they were waiting for her somewhere... Well, at least, she thought, I'm no worse off than I was before. And it occurred to her with relief that she would still be driving a car whose controls she was used to. But... She shouted into the wind: 'How do we turn?'

He caught at least the word 'turn'. He gestured back the way he had come. 'Farm entrance. Only a short way. Reverse into it.'

'OK.' She did not wait to learn how he himself proposed to manage. If we knew about the farm gate, then he must be familiar with this road; in such weather, he could never just casually have observed it. But anyway, she couldn't care. Get into the car, back it, turn it, step on the gas: get home, get home!

She prayed that Rufie would be in. The whole evening had been hideous; she needed his warmth, his affection, his ever passionate interest in all that might befall her. Dear Rufie, beloved Rufie, the perfect companion, the perfect chum! 'Oh, my God, my poor dovey darling!' Rufie would say

when he heard about the white face peering out at her from the little black car following, about the fall of the tree, the terror lest her pursuers had shot ahead of her after all while she was in the pub and might be waiting for her somewhere beyond the tree. ‘Oh, my *poor* dovey darling!’ She prayed, she prayed that when she got home at last, Rufie would be there. *If* she got home.

And he was there. In the vast tarmac’d yard seven storeys below her own window, the planners had arranged a car park for the tenants of the flats—several long rows of open sheds, no walls, just peaked roofs rather dreadfully thatched to match in with the pseudo-Tudo of the rest of the block. You drove in from one open side and parked in any space that happened to be empty, simply driving forward and out when you were ready to go. By custom, many tenants adopted their own places in one or other of the sheds, much as elderly clubmen may appropriate certain chairs. And in his accustomed space—there was Rufie’s car. She drove in next to it, leapt out and made a dash through the rain to the blessed light and warmth of the entrance hall and up to the flat. ‘Oh Rufie, thank God, thank God you’re in!’

Only just that blessed minute and still very cold and shivery from being out in that horrible storm. But he’d got lonely and bored, his sketches had all gone wrong, he’d rung up Etho and gone round. And now he’d had a jolly stiff brandy and she must have the same; and he peeled off her soaking clothes—so relaxing with Rufie who didn’t care whether one had anything on or not—wrapped her in a warm dressing-gown and poured her out a drink. ‘Oh, no darling, you know I never do; and in fact I did have one, on the way home, at a pub.’

‘Well, you must have another, Sari, you look flaked-out,

honestly you do. So now, darling, tell from the beginning. You were followed from the cinema?—You should have let one of us come with you.'

'What, and see me in my one poor fill-um? I couldn't. It was better to be alone.'

'And they followed you from there?'

'Oh Rufie, this dreadful face staring out at me, peering out at me, this horrible white face sort of upturned, as if the —the person was urging on the driver, pointing ahead to my car—!'

'There were two people then?'

'I could only see this one face, well, this one white blur —to the left of the driving seat. And the—hands....' But she could not bring herself to tell him about the blood-stained hands. 'What's so frightening is that this is a new lot. I've never seen this—this awful white face before. And a different car, a little black mini. They always do use black cars.'

Black cars, very ordinary and inconspicuous. 'Perhaps it's just that you've never noticed; millions of minis about, you just wouldn't think of it.' He said carefully, knowing his own temerity: 'You're sure? I mean, driving through a storm, people do press forward, peer ahead at the road....'

'Oh, Rufie,' she said wearily, 'don't give me that again! Was I really being followed?—yes, I *was* being followed. How do I know I was being followed?—I know because I'm used to it, they've been watching me, following me for all these years, I know every turn and trick. And why am I being followed?—because they want the ring. And they're ready to kill me, if they don't get the ring.'

The marriage ring. The huge, splendid, glittering marriage ring that he had given her four years ago—that huge, splendid, glittering young man, Prince Aldo, heir to

the dukedom of the tiny republic of San Juan el Pirata, of magnificence and wealth untold.

They were ready to kill her, to get back the ring.

2

SHE HAD DRIVEN DOWN that evening to Wren's Hill in Hertfordshire. They had a rather chichi little cinema club down there, which specialised in rare out-of-date films; and they were showing, for just that one Saturday, one of the rarest of them all—Sari Morne in *The Spanish Steps*.

A fair enough evening when she had started out; not till she was tearing along the country roads in her lovely new Halcyon had the storm begun to threaten, the clouds hanging dark and low, blotting out the light of an autumn evening, the air very heavy and still. If it broke before the doors opened, she thought, there would be few others turning out from their comfortable telly-sets for the pleasure of seeing, perhaps for the last time, this the last film—the first and the last film—ever to be made by Sari Morne. Sari Morne the bright star, flashing overnight into instant fame. Sari Morne, falling star, vanishing as unpredictably, never to be seen again. Or only in occasional revivals such as this, of a picture now four years old—four years old and yet unforgotten by the masses who had created for themselves an image, only to lose it the next moment behind a veil of obscurity, never explained away.

Even to herself—never quite explained away. Of course at the end, things had been—difficult. And then she'd been out of the scene for a bit, certainly. But even so... Just no more offers, that was all. Options with the studio not taken up, money paid over as per (not very generous) contract—but no work required. She had badgered Ethelbert about it, he still worked for the company; but Etho just shrugged and said that after all, darling, she *had* left them rather flat,

hadn't she?—all those scenes to be cooked in afterwards, with stand-ins in huge hats—just fortunate that the film had been set in sunny Italy and they could get away with wide straw brims. 'You were so naughty, Sari, rushing off with your princeling all the time, knowing you were needed....'

But she knew it had been nothing to do with Aldo really; Aldo was now long gone. She'd behaved badly to the company, but that didn't mean that she hadn't grown up since then; she wouldn't behave badly again. So—? Not much talent, perhaps; she was prepared to grant them that. But a beauty incomparable, a 'differentness', a persuasiveness, a charm—she knew it herself, could not fail to know, though she accepted it without vanity, simply a fact: a warmth and a humour and a charm, all the notices had said it—and the beauty.

Beautiful, all the critics had said—and something so much more than beautiful.

Vi Feather, sitting behind her grating, scooping in the money—for there had been quite a little crowd drifting into the Wren's Hill cinema after all—had recognised her immediately. 'Well, I never! It's you!'

'Good heavens, Vi, what on earth are you doing here?'

The small, pinched, raddled face, the greedy red-tipped claws, all a-sparkle with chippy little pretence-diamond rings, automatically closed down on the pound notes as she chattered, slapping down tickets, shoving back the change beneath her grille of metal bars. 'I chucked it, dear, soon after you—left. Glamour they think it is, but there's not much glamour, not reely, not in dressing: running from one to the other, except where it's the star and you don't often get a chance of that—keeping all that stuff in your mind, Continuity always after you.' A hand passed into Sari's range of vision, plonking down a note and Vi flicked back

the ticket fastidiously, lest the brown skin touch her own. ('I can't be doing with these Paks, their nails so pale at the ends of their fingers!) Well, so I got a chance of this job so I came down here; pays all right and I do a bit of cleaning as well, if you want to know,' said Vi, daring Sari to think less of her for it. 'And then Dad died so I thought I better move in with Mum, save rent and all; Camden Town, we are—'

'You come all the way down from London?'

'Well, jobs are hard to get, I thought I better hang on. And it's handy, Intertown bus almost from door to door. And you? Not working at all, dear?'

'No, I gave it up too.'

'Studio wouldn't put up with it, I suppose?' said Vi shrewdly. 'Well, you did lead them a dance. I'll never forget them last days for all the retakes, having to squeeze the stand-in into your dresses, Wardrobe going mad for hats to hide her face. Wonderful they got away with it, reely; but of course it creaks if you're in the know. D'j'ever see any of the others nowadays? That redhead feller, did your dresses? —if you could call him a feller,' said Vi, lowering her voice. 'Queer as a coot, I always thought, meself. Carrying on with Angelico, him that played your lead. World star he is these days, Angelico.'

'Yes, he is and you'll find yourself in big trouble if you go round talking scandal like that about him; you could ruin him. He married into some huge, titled family so I should just watch it if I were you.'

'Oh, well—it's only what I thought. So who else? Sofy Burnsey? But she had a very small part. Not that small parts would suit her now,' said Vi Feather, sniggering at her own wit. 'Pity she's put on so much weight, I'd hardly have reckernised her—though mind you, it's done her no harm, she's always on the telly these days, so I'm told—can't

afford one meself. As a matter of fact she's—' But her voice trailed off, suddenly assumed a coy expression. 'Well,' I never—it's my Mr Adam! Adam the Gardener, I call him,' she confided as, with a murmured greeting, the tall form moved away, 'because he always wears a flower in his buttonhole. Grows them himself, he says. I passed a comment once and we got into a chat and now and again he'll take out the flower and present it to me with oh!—ever such a gesture.' She bridled gruesomely. 'Well—more than a single flower in our day, wasn't it, Miss Morne?'

The flowers! The roses, the orchids, the great baskets of scented magnolias! And one day, nestling at the heart of the biggest of all the bouquets—the ring! 'D'j'ever hear of that Prince of yours nowadays, dear?'

'No,' said Sari. 'That ended.' And the old, cold fear was chilling her spine, the feeling of being watched. From the corner of her eye she glimpsed for the first time a flicker of something—familiar: of colour, of light, so ephemeral that she could hardly tell what. But something vaguely reminiscent of something—of someone—she knew. She said uneasily: 'I'll have to go in now.'

'When I've got rid of all this, I thought I'd go in and see it meself, for old times' sake. Ah, those were the days, Miss Morne, weren't they? And best of all for me was the time I worked with *you*. All the excitement in your dressing-room, especially after the Prince began coming: the flowers, the presents and then—that ring! You *would* wear it in the picture. "She's not to wear it," Mr Solon says to me—Mr Solon speaking to *me*! It's the only time he ever did. "It's too valuable," he says, "to be knocking around the dressing-rooms." But you never could be told.'

'Yes, well, Vi, that's all forgotten now.'

'Not by me, it isn't. What've I got these days but me

memories?' She cast a surreptitious eye over the beautiful coat of softest tawny brown leather to match the gleam of hair almost extinguished by the huge black stetson-shaped hat; the fine leather gloves, the expensive handbag, enormous, of fine canvas, hand-painted in a pattern of black and brown. 'Times are hard for me now, Miss Morne, honest they are.' She opened her own shabby handbag, scrabbled in its grubby depths for an already well-used paper handkerchief and began, unattractively, to snivel. Ugh! thought Sari; and yet—poor thing! Was she working up to a touch? she wondered. Small hope if she were! One had enough money, lot and lots of money compared with poor Vi, but somehow it all seemed to dribble away. Rufie was such a seducer where spending was concerned: what was the use of temptation, was his favourite quotation, if one didn't give way to it? And they'd been on a shopping spree and here she was penniless, long before the end of the quarter. ...

Nevertheless, the watcher in the shadows observed, pennies were scraped together in the end: a note handed over with a look of half-contemptuous compassion before the black hat and the high black boots and the beautiful tawny coat disappeared behind the shabby curtain into the auditorium.

The little cinema was quite crowded after all; many who, like herself, had come to see only the feature film, were ploughing about in the dark, trying to find seats. Peering through the gloom she ran full tilt into a man coming the other way, and landed up with her arms around his neck. 'Oh, I am so sorry!'

He restored her to her feet, smiling down at her. 'Not at all—be my guest!' The usherette's torch lit up his face for a

moment, and passed on down the aisle.

A fair face, a handsome face, clean shaven, with that look in the light blue eyes that never failed to turn her heart to water. That look of vague melancholy, of being, somehow, a bit—lost. Aldo had had that look and—one or two others; and highly misleading in every case it had turned out to be. But here it was again and here she went again, head over heels in love with that look—that look of easy independence and strength, and vulnerability.

He held her for a moment, as though to reassure himself that she was all right. She repeated: 'I'm terribly sorry, really I am.'

'I enjoyed every minute of it,' he said and let her go—but reluctantly?—and passed on up the aisle. She knew a moment of absurdly bleak despair at the thought that she would never see him again.

A mile from the cinema—she knew that she was being followed. A mini—the same make and horse-power as Rufie's or she might never have noticed it. She slowed down and the little black car slowed down, accelerated and it maintained its distance behind her. I'm frightened, she thought, I'm terrified—driving here alone through the black night and the storm, along the small, dark country lanes: and they're following me again. And a face was illuminated for a moment, dead white in the lightning flash, peering out through the spattered windscreen with the flick-flick-flick of the wipers moving across and across it; and two hands seemed to stretch forward, spread-eagled against the glass, as though only that prevented their reaching out for her. What red glow from some street lamp unobserved, from some passing window, perhaps, curtained red—what red glow had seemed for a moment to turn those grasping hands

to crimson, as though they were bathed in blood?

She thrust down her foot on the accelerator and the big car flung itself forward, screeched round a bend in the road, round another, was wrenched into the car park of a wayside pub, lights immediately extinguished. She caught again a glimpse of the white face thrust forward, peering ahead into the darkness; and the little car passed by her, unseeing, rocketing on through the rain. She decided: I'll let it get well ahead. I'll go in and have a drink.

The first thought of the man behind the bar as she came in through the door, pulling off her big black hat, thrashing it against her thigh to shake the wet from it, was: My God, what on earth have we got here? His second thought was: But, by God—isn't she beautiful?

If she was strange, she was deliberately strange; and she could be strange because she knew that she was beautiful. She was—twenty-six, perhaps? Tall, marvellously shaped, with narrow hips and long legs, slender from thigh to ankle, like a boy's legs. Her hands and feet were narrow and delicately boned, her eyes a deep blue-grey: the face perfectly ovalled, a smooth, golden-y skin, the whole with its shadowed planes beneath the high cheek bones a miracle of moulding. She's like a cat, he thought, a lovely, smooth golden-y cat, a lioness perhaps—but no, that was far too fierce and strong: a cheetah, more like. But her hair—! 'My God,' said the man, before he could stop himself, 'whatever have you done to your hair?'

She was totally unoffended; only, as ever, a little thrown by a word of criticism, doubtful, insecure. 'Don't you like it?'

It had been cut 'en brosse', but longer than a man's crew-cut might be, perhaps two inches high on the crown of her head, brushed upwards all over from above her ears -

very thick and close like a tight-fitting wig of soft animal fur, and dyed to a deeply glowing russety red, the colour of dark orange marmalade lit from beneath with gold, with no pretence to any shade that any hair in the world could ever have been. ‘Well, I’m sorry, love,’ he said, abashed by his own outburst. ‘It just comes a bit of a shock at first. But, mind, it suits you.’ And indeed once you got accustomed to it, she was beautiful with it; beautiful.

She peeled off her leather driving gloves, heaved one slender haunch on to a bar stool, balancing with the toe of a high black boot on the brass rail. On this night of drenching rain, no one else in the pub. ‘Give me a brandy, would you?’ she said. ‘A big one. And please have one yourself.’ And she burst out with it. ‘I don’t usually drink anything. But I’m a bit scared. I think I’m being followed.’

‘Followed?’ he said, pausing for a moment, standing at the gantry, one hand on the brandy bottle, looking back at her over his shoulder. ‘Followed—by who?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, but doubtfully.

‘You mean some feller—?’

‘No, no, nothing like that.’ He placed the glass in front of her and she splashed a little soda into it, not waiting for him; she sketched a salute and gulped down half the contents, put down the glass on the counter and sat staring into its sparkling depths. It was always easier to tell things to strangers. She said simply: ‘I think they want to kill me.’

Oh, crikey! he thought. Another of these nuts! Her, with her hair like a strangely dyed pussy-cat’s. But the wonderful face! He said more gently than he had intended: ‘I’m sure no one wants to kill you.’

‘That’s what everyone always says,’ she said. ‘But I know that someone does.’

‘Why *should* anyone?’

‘Well, I... Well, I know something, you see. And they’re afraid I’ll tell someone about it. I haven’t the faintest intention of telling anyone, I wouldn’t dream of it. But they can’t know that, can they?’

‘So you do know who you’re being followed by.’

‘I know why. I don’t know exactly who.’

‘Better tell the police then.’

‘I have told them. They just say what you said, which is what everyone always says: “I’m sure no one really wants to kill you.”’

He took a long swig of his drink, eyeing her dubiously. ‘If they want to kill you, why don’t they just kill you? What’s the use, following you about?’ But he answered his own question: ‘Perhaps they just want to scare you.’

‘That wouldn’t stop me telling. If I wanted to, which I don’t. But they’d never accept that.’

‘If they thought you might—well, blackmail them—?’

‘They wouldn’t think that. I’ve got enough money. But while I’m alive I know—what I know. What they think I know. I think they’re just waiting for a chance.’

The brandy warmed the cockles of his heart. ‘Look, love, people don’t go about murdering people. I mean, not just ordinary people—’

‘These aren’t just ordinary people. They’re very unordinary people. They’re in something called the Red Mafia, Mafia Rossa, which is about fifty times worse than any ordinary old Italian Mafia—’

‘Oh, come on!’ he said. ‘The Mafia. What secrets could *you* have that the Mafia wouldn’t want you to have?’

‘It’s not the Mafia themselves. They’re just carrying out orders. The real people giving the orders are very rich and grand.’

‘People don’t give orders to the Mafia.’

‘Those people do,’ she said.

Just nuts, poor girl. On the other hand—she was frightened, he could see that, properly frightened. She really believed in all this tommy rot. All the same, soon he must turn her out. He glanced up at the clock; five minutes to Time, and anyway he was waiting for the doctor to come. He confided in her; he was proud of himself and his care for his wife. Baby coming more or less any time now and the specialist had promised to call in. Not the ordinary doctor, mind: the special gynaecologist, rooms in Harley Street and the lot. But he was on the staff of the hospital here in Wren’s Hill and had rooms in Wren’s Hill too and this was the first baby. ‘Nothing but the best,’ he said to Sari, telling her all about it. ‘My wife and my baby—nothing but the best.’

‘Well, I think that’s lovely,’ said Sari.

And *she* was lovely too. He looked at her closely again. ‘Don’t mind me asking, but haven’t I seen you somewhere?’

‘If you’ve been in the town in the last few days, you may have seen my photograph. There’s an old film of mine, showing at the Cinema Club. That’s why I’m here.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ he said. ‘Some Indian name. The wife was talking about you only this afternoon.’

‘Sari,’ she said. ‘Sari Morne.’

‘Well, I’m damned! She was cursing herself, the baby coming a bit before its time or so they think, so she wouldn’t be able to go into town tonight to see you. Mad about you she is. You was in some Italian film; but three years ago or more, she says, and she never saw you again.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘That was my last. But you see—Italy: so it’s not so impossible about the Mafia, is it?’ And she put down her empty glass with a little clonk on the polished wood surface of the counter, glanced out uneasily at the

blackness of the night and gave a little shudder. 'I must go.'

He followed her glance, saw where the heavy raindrops bounced and shimmered on a gleaming black rooftop. 'Decent bus you seem to have, out there.'

'It's the new Cadmus, the Halcyon 3000.'

'Ah, yes, very popular that is. We've got several right here in Wren's Hill. All that advertising, I suppose. I must say, outwardly it looks much the same as anything else.'

'That's right,' she said. 'Inconspicuous.'

For the first time he thought that this might, after all, be something serious. 'You especially choose an inconspicuous car?'

'That's right,' she said again, dully; and got down from the stool slowly, as though reluctantly, perched the big black hat on top of her head with a careless bang on the crown to push it down further over the glow of her hair, pulled on the soft leather gloves, slung the handbag over her shoulder. Beautiful. Beneath the brim of the black hat she looked more beautiful than ever, he thought, everything about her was beautiful, everything she owned, luxurious and beautiful. Only the fear in the shadowed blue-grey eyes was disturbing. He came round to the front of the bar and put a hand on her arm. 'Don't worry, love. They'll have gone past now. They'll be miles ahead of you.' He didn't believe in her followers but it was evident that she did; she was deeply afraid.

'Unless they've realised and stopped somewhere and are—waiting.' But she would have to go. He went with her to the door. 'Don't worry. You'll be all right.' He stood in the lighted entrance, one hand already lifted to shoot the bolt behind her. 'Be seeing you!'

'I dare say you will,' she said. 'In the *News of the World*.' And stepped out into the rain and opened the nearside door

and shifted across into the driving seat. The overhead light, automatically switched on, illuminated the beautifully finished interior; it was a very expensive car. He looked it over with interest till she reached across and slammed shut the door and the light went out.

‘Well, goodnight then, love!’ he called again; and the headlights sprang on and the engine purred and she drove off slowly and then faster—faster—faster—away from the warmth and the light, away from security, along the lonely road.

And straight across the path of the speeding car—the great tree fell.

3

PHINEAS DEVIGNE LIVED UP at the top of the steep incline which gives Wren's Hill its name: a rather beautiful one-storey house which he resolutely refused to call a bungalow. Nanny came through from her sitting-room as he stood in the hall peeling off his soaking wet raincoat; smelling of cold cream and tightly belted into her pink woollen dressing-gown with its tasselled cord: a big woman not improved by a heavy greying moustache. 'Well, so you're home?'

Usually it irritated him intensely: what was one supposed to reply? But tonight—tonight there was a sort of glow within him that he could not quite place, not like any of the minor glows that had, of necessity, for the past year or so punctuated his life; and he only said, holding out the wet mac, 'I'd better hang this somewhere to drip.'

If he had been Ena, Nanny would have been all cluckings of distress, urging on him hot drinks and cossetings. But Ena had gone where her faithless little heart had led her and he had custody of Ena Meena; and the one person Nanny loved more than Ena was Ena Mee. She bore within her an unceasing resentment against a law that would take away a child from its mother, however ill behaved, and hand it over to a mere man. And what fun those bygone days had been! - with Mummy so naughty and indiscreet, all those secrets and coverings-over and the little rewards of teas and even lunches in places Mr Devigne never even heard about, and exciting little gifts that were not to be shown to him! She was living with a very rich gentleman now, Mummy was, and many a chat she had

with Nanny over the 'phone when His Nibs was working at the hospital or up in London, in Harley Street. She took the wet mackintosh, however, ungraciously. 'I'll hang it to drip in our bathroom, over the bath. It's warm in there, it'll dry out for the morning. And gimme that flah from your buttonhole, I'll throw it down the lav.' Our bathroom was hers and Ena Mee's. 'I s'pose you don't want a hot drink?'

'No thank you, Nanny, I think I need something a bit stronger.' He tossed his soaking wet gloves on to the umbrella stand. 'Some storm!'

'Well, fancy going out on such a night, anyway, just to the cinema!'

'I'd have had to go and see Mrs Dawkins at the Fox. And anyway,' he pointed out mildly, 'it wasn't nearly so bad when I started.' He glanced over in the general direction of Ena Mee's room. 'She wasn't upset by it?'

'What, by you going off for the evening?'

'By the storm,' he said with an edge to his voice.

'No,' said Nanny. 'Nanny was with her. Even if she didn't have her Mummy,' she added with a significant sniff. But as he turned away without reply towards the dining-room and a decanter, she enquired, apparently placating: 'Well, how was the picture?'

'Quite good,' he said, briefly, unrelenting.

'Sari Morne came up to expectations, did she?'

'Yes, she was fine.'

'Funny she died out. Lovely film that was, her in that Italian place. That bit', said Nanny craftily, 'where she runs up them steps with her lover coming after her—'

'You're thinking of some other film,' said Phin. 'She never does run up the steps. As a matter of fact,' he added, a touch craftily on his own part, 'on this occasion a young woman ran down some steps: and full tilt into *me*.'

‘Whatever do you mean—ran into you?’

‘Some girl, looking for a seat I suppose, ran down the steps and I bumped into her.’

‘Oh, so you did go to the cinema?’ said Nanny; and could have bit her silly tongue out, honest she could.

4

AND IN THE FLAT next morning, Rufie was ringing up Sofy. Sofy was short for Sofa because she was so wickedly fat. She was another of the somewhat shifting group which had come to be known - from a Ronald Searle drawing it was - though in fact there were not often as many as eight of them, as the Eight Best Friends. Sari's Eight Best Friends. 'Sofy? It's all right to talk. She's still sound asleep.'

'Are you sure, Rufie? I know by your voice that it's Something.'

'Ap-solutely soundo: I've just peeked in.' The Eight Best friends were always tricking Rufie into saying certain words whose correct pronunciation subtly evaded him.

'Yes, well, the cinema at Wren's Hill, last night—'

'She has no idea—?'

'No, no, she didn't want anyone to go, so one just plays it that way. Why she should care—?'

'I suppose it's a bit humiliating, poor love,' said Sofy, 'not ever getting any more work. And I never can think why. Of course she pretends to outsiders that it's because she won't do nude scenes.'

'And that's really to laugh,' said Rufie. 'Don't you remember the other day when she opened the door, practically starko and couldn't think what the lady was so surprised about?'

'No, did she? Oh, Sari!' said Sofy, fondly. 'She really is too wonderful.'

'And in a state because the woman might be upset. I mean, the rest of us were falling about with laughter but Sari was so afraid she'd shocked the poor thing and hurt her

feelings.' 'Sari is a very special person,' said Sofy. 'Yes, but this time, darling, it really is a bit too much.... '

And Sofy rang up Etho. 'Darling—have you heard from Rufie?'

The gay, high voice that always sounded as though you were the one person in the world that Etho had been hoping would ring up! 'I saw him last night.'

'He called in at your place?'

'Not to tell me anything in particular, though.'

'It's Sari again,' said Sofy.

'Oh, my God, no! What now?'

'Followed.'

'Oh, well that,' said Etho. 'She's always being followed.'

'But now some elaborate story, Rufie says, of a tree across the road, blown down by the storm. And can you believe it?—swapped cars with some man who also couldn't get by because of the tree and *he* took her car and *she* took his—'

'My dear, it's all just fantasy, you people get so worked up. Sari gets bored, she cooks up these things for her own inner amusement. And she knows how Rufie does love a bit of drama.'

'It's more than that, Etho. I mean, no one loves Sari more than I do, but sometimes I do think that she's a little bit kinky.'

'She's not kinky in the least. She's bored, that's all. She's having fun. You don't know Sari....'

But he rang up Nan, all the same. 'Nan, do go round and see what goes with Sari. They're all in a flap because she had some adventure or other last night. She arrived home in

something like a state of shock, apparently. Rufie had to ply her with brandy—'

Nan was the newest of the Eight Best Friends. She listened with horror to Etho's brief outline of the story of the tree blown across the road. 'Oh, poor darling! And in that awful weather. I'll go round to the flat, of course I will, and see that she's all right.'

'The only thing is', said Etho, carefully, 'that Rufie and Sofy don't believe a word of it.'

'Don't believe it? Why not?'

'I've no idea,' said Etho. 'You'd better ask Rufie.'

So before she went round to Sari's, Nan telephoned the flat. 'Rufie? Is it all right to talk?'

'Yes, yes, brandy and pills last night and still absolutely soundo.'

'Why don't you and Sofy believe this thing about her swapping cars?'

'Nan, darling, you don't know Sari yet,' said Rufie. 'She's always being followed and having these terrible adventures. Of course she never swapped cars with anyone. There's not a word of truth in it.'

Nan was silent, bewildered. They were all so bewildering—exciting, amusing, glamorous, so quick and flashing; she never could think why they bothered with her, a sad, bored, ordinary widow, much older than any of them (except perhaps Etho) who had somehow got drawn into their enchanted circle. But—bewildering. She said at last slowly, a little ashamed of being so dull and prosaic: 'There's one simple way to find out. Why don't you go down to the car park and see if the Halcyon is there?'

‘But I’m looking at it out of the window this minute,’ said Rufie. ‘Of course it’s there.’

In the event, they *all* turned up that morning at the flat.

Sari woke late, very mutterly and grumbly, with cat-like stretchings and yawnings and a great deal of gasping about how awful one felt in the mornings and how dreadful it was to be alive at all. Rufie, well used to her total inability to behave like a human being until fortified with cigarettes and black coffee, paid her no attention whatsoever except to supply her with both. He was employed somewhat spasmodically as a designer for the great fashion house of Christophe et Cie in Regent Street, and mostly worked at home. Home to Rufie was where he happened to be living—with any luck in someone else’s apartment. Much loved—by both sexes—he easily settled in, a welcome cuckoo in any available nest, bringing with him little but an assortment of only very slightly outré clothes and a simple arrangement of the tools of his trade. The work, when he was on form, came to him with such ease that he would sit on the edge of his bed with a pad on his knee and a few paint pots precariously balanced along the pillow and dash off sketch after sketch that in a brief time would be making headlines in all the couture magazines. Form, alas! however, too often eluded him and no arrangement of paint pots could produce anything but despair. His income in consequence was hardly a dependable factor; but since he would give away without a thought every penny he had, he equally without a thought accepted, when in need, the bounty of his friends. True, the second was a little inclined to out-balance the first but he was quite genuinely unaware of the fact. Calculation of this sort had no place in Rufie’s mind. At the moment, Sari had a large flat and was all too frequently short of spending

money. Rufie simply appropriated the second bedroom, and while he was in funds, what he had was Sari's also. The second bedroom led out, via the kitchen, to the fire-escape steps; so his social life, if a little curious to those who were narrow-minded about such things, need offend no one. Not that Sari cared two hoots how other people conducted their private lives. Live and let live.

Bathed, extravagantly scented, in tight black velvet jeans with a black sequin monkey swarming up one leg with little clutching hands, in a vast black woolly sweater, hair standing up in its thick close fur on top of her head like a glowing, golden-y moss, by midday she was finally restored to life. She came into the bedroom where Rufie was curled up, paint pots a-wobble, sketching away like mad. He said, continuing to scribble, the act of creation apparently quite undisturbed by conversation: 'Sunday! Nan's coming over. Where could we go, what could we do?' The storm had passed away leaving a beautiful sunshiny autumn day.

'I'll have to wait in, till this man comes and picks up his car.' 'Oh yes, of course, the man and the car,' said Rufie. Assured by Etho that it would all turn out to be a bit of private nonsense on Sari's part, he had given it little further thought; only how was she going to get out of all this stage-set, poor love? He suggested craftily: 'You said he'd given you his number. Why don't you ring and hurry him up?'

'I tried but I keep getting the wrong people. The number's all blurred with the rain.'

'Oh, what a bore!' He tried to make things easy. 'You're sure this wasn't all a nightmare, love? I mean, a sort of dream—'

'But it happened when I wasn't asleep,' said Sari.

'Yes, but... Well that does look very much like your Halcyon in the car park,' said Rufie. 'I saw from the sitting-

room, its nose sticking out from the shed.'

'Well, of course it looks like my Halcyon. His was a Halcyon too. I told you.' She shrugged. 'Well, he'll turn up some time. Meanwhile—what?'

'If you can't go out, we'd better ring round some of the chums to come and have lunch. Except of course, we haven't got anything to eat. I'd go down to the delicatessen,' said Rufie, using another of his words, 'but I'm flat broke, myself.'

'I've got a bit stashed away in my wiggy-bank but I simply must hoard it.' The marmalade hair-do was a source of enormous expense since nobody could achieve its incandescent effect but a terribly special man who most unfortunately lived and worked in Rome. 'A couple more weeks and I'll simply *have* to go to Luigi. Would Nan bring some vittles?' The heavenly part about Nan was that she seemed to be always in funds.

'One rather tickly doesn't want to ask Nan again.' Particularly was yet another of the words. 'I mean, she brought it last time *and* the time before, and she always contributes.' All those lovely chicking sangwidges, he recollect ed.

'She runs them up herself in the kitching,' said Sari. But the chicking sangwidges were a joke against himself.

Sofy would be no good. She was currently resting and even flatter broke than usual. 'I do think it's hard on her, poor old Sofa. She's got to stay fat because nowadays she only gets fat-girl parts, but there aren't all that many fat-girl parts going; and she has to spend a fortune stuffing herself with food she can't afford, to keep herself in work she doesn't get.'

'What about Charley?'

'Virryvirry good oideah,' said Sari in a stage Indian

accent subtly tinged with Scouse. Charley, she remembered, had sworn to himself to spend today swotting up for his medical exams, but she knew how all too easy it would be to tempt him from this path. ‘And Pony?’

So Rufie rang up Nan again and Pony, and settled back with Sari over more black coffees on the immense long studio couch. ‘The minute I get paid for my sketches, we’ll stand Nan a terrific meal at the Cellier du Thing, to make up for all this scrounging.’

‘Or a presie. What could we sell,’ said Sari, looking round the room, ‘that would buy Nan a really gorgeous presie?’ She knew a girl who was madly covetous of the sequin monkey pants....

They fell to planning the presie. Rufie might design a simply outrageous hat, what about that?—something that would really do something for Nan’s image which, let’s face it, was just a shade, well a deep dark shadow in fact, too twin-set-and-pearls. They could make it together. Sari had one of those rather smelly Japanese parasols which would do splendidly (without the handle of course) for the brim, and then with holes cut out between the struts. And into the holes, one could push plastic chrysanthemums, masses of bronzey and yellow chrysanths, just right for the Japanese theme, or was that China?—and make a sort of crown of them too; and in fact in summer Nan could use real fresh ones, dashing off to the loo now and then if it was a hot restaurant or anything like that, to renew them. (Sari herself was a great dasher off to loos. ‘I *must* go for a quick wee,’ she would say, emerging half an hour later with a brand new face-do and general air of radiance that halted reproaches on masculine lips.)

Or even sprinkle them with water, agreed Rufie, it being after all, an umbrella. But the parasols did smell

terribly oily. What about a pet?—poor Nan, so lonely without her husband. A hamster?—in a very special cage to make it more expensive because hamsters were probably quite cheap and one did want to make it a really handsome present. Sari, however, was not too sure that a hamster would sufficiently compensate for the departed husband—Bertrand his name had been, wouldn't you know?—and there'd be all that cleaning out to do. They decided at last to ring up Etho. Etho was terribly good on presents and might even come in with them, so they could do something really stupendous.

Etho rose to the occasion in his usual delighted fashion and suggested a pot of orchids, frightfully expensive and apparently they took the most ghastly amount of care and attention, quite as much as Nan could possibly have lavished on Bertrand, so would occupy her in that way, and no problem about cleaning out. He readily agreed to come in on it, and by the way he would collect her and bring her over to the lunch and a couple of bottles too. Etho was one of the Eight, really the first and to Sari most important of the Eight, but he played life very cool, keeping himself to himself, amused by them all, entertained, fond, indeed devoted—but uninvolved. He had known Sari from the days of *The Spanish Steps*, which had been made by the company he worked for; indeed had probably been the archway through whom she had made most of her friends in this country. She had lived largely abroad until she had come here to make the picture, and had no other ties in England. He explained it all to Nan, driving her up to the Hampstead flat for lunch. 'Oh, and I warn you that a presie may be on the way.' He loyally suppressed any mention of the orchids but described the proposal for a Japanese-sunshade hat.

Nan was much alarmed. 'But they wouldn't really have

done it?’

‘Don’t you believe it! They get caught up with these ideas—of course they’re hopped-up half the time....’

‘You don’t mean—on drugs?’ said Nan, shocked.

‘Well, it’s only a bit of pot. And not Sari, she never touches the stuff. But Rufie gets lit and then he incites her to further mad ideas, which after all are very ingenious—and nothing will stop them. We had a friend once, well not too unlike yourself, as a matter of fact, and they broke into her flat while she was away and painted it throughout in a lovely Van Gogh yellow. Like walking into sunshine, they said, and so warm and cheering for her after all those dismal greys and greens she’d had before. They were genuinely miserable when she said it was more like walking into a tub of butter and brought in the decorators, with more nice muted greens and greys.’

‘Of course Sari *could* live in a Van Gogh yellow flat—and wear a chrysanthemum hat,’ said Nan, a tiny bit jealous of the friend not too much unlike herself. She was consumed with interest in them all and especially in Sari, but hitherto had not quite liked to ask too many questions. ‘That’s not her real name, I suppose? I mean, no one could really be called Sari Morne?’

‘No, no, Norma Jean Baker I dare say. She says it was Maria Bloggs and no one can shake her, but that’s only Sari-nonsense. Solon asked her when he first met her and she simply said, “Sari Morne.” Of course he knew it wasn’t true but what did that matter? It was a great name for cinema.’

‘I don’t even know who Solon is.’

‘Well, he’s was, because he’s dead now. He was my boss and it was he who found Sari and as it were created her.’

‘As a film star?’

Etho liked Nan very much. It was he who had

introduced her into the circle. He had picked her up at a very dull party where there had been a great deal to drink but nothing to eat. 'A super party?' he had suggested politely, upon introduction.

'It might be if there'd been another "p" in super,' she had replied and on the strength of this joke he had invited her next day to one of the lunches at the Hampstead flat. It had in fact turned out to be the only such joke Nan had ever made or ever did make; but she had nevertheless infiltrated into their ranks. Why, they could never quite make out; it was her innocence, perhaps, which was really rather sweet, about all that to them was just everyday life—and indeed there was something refreshing about her, like a clear stream winding its way through all the spume and spray of their own turbulent waters. Her naive curiosity amused Etho, nor did the twinge of jealousy escape him. Lounging back in the driving seat, long legs stretched to the pedals, thin hand casual on the driving wheel, he settled down to explain what he could of Sari....

An orphan. There'd been a 'plane crash apparently, when she was about three or four or something and she'd been snatched from the jaws of death, but her parents had perished, complete with grandparents and uncles and aunts, the lot. Well, not all in the 'plane, perhaps (Nan was so literal!), but anyway there was not a soul left except one simply fearful aunt, apparently strictly not designed by nature for the comfort of bereft kiddywinx. 'Very rich and smart, trailed the poor child round Europe, never any proper schooling, and then ended up by falling ill rather suddenly in some inconvenient spot, Como or somewhere, but anyway in that part of Switzerland if Como is in Switzerland which I never quite know....'

'Italian Switzerland,' said Nan in her confident way—as

though it really mattered, Etho thought. One part of Switzerland was very much like another, if not worse.

‘Well, anyway, she was brought to Rome, to this convent hospital which is outside Rome, towards Tarquinia, and there she died. The girl was left absolutely friendless and the nuns kept her there at any rate till the funeral, and they would have done afterwards, I suppose, till something was arranged. But anyway, Solon was out there looking for locations for *The Spanish Steps*—we had a frightful job with the box-office, I may say, because naturally the customers thought it was a Spanish film and stayed away in droves in case they should be subjected to a bullfight—’

‘And quite right, too.’

‘—and it was only Sari being such a hit that brought them all in, after all, and saved it. Well, as I was saying, Solon was mooching around and he happened on this funeral in progress and thought that here was a nice bit of local colour so he shuffled along with the mourners—a riot, he said it was, black horses and plumes, the lot—I think he made most of it up, actually, it simply couldn’t have been true. But anyway,’ said Etho, coming up for breath, ‘there at the graveside he saw this kneeling figure. Kneeling there weeping, she was, and he said he’d never seen anything so woe-begone—or so beautiful—in his life. The place was packed with nuns and priests and what have you, all in pitch black and absolutely hideous, with little rimless glasses every last one of them—and there in the middle of them this absolutely golden goddess, crouching there crying. And then when they threw the earth in on the grave, she seemed not to be able to stand it one second longer and she got up and slipped away through the gravestones—the like of which, I may add, he said had to be seen to be believed. So a covey of the nuns ran after her and there was

a great clucking and calling but she just scudded on, screaming at them to leave her alone, leave her alone. Well, she wasn't alone for long because as soon as the nuns had been well and truly left behind, he caught up with her and he took her by the arm and turned her towards him—he said he simply had to look once more into that marvellous face. And she turned to him—and he suddenly realised that it was woebegone no longer, but radiant: absolutely radiant with happiness....'

'With her aunt just dead?' said Nan, rather shocked.

'Well, that was it, wasn't it? Solon said, sort of stupefied: "You weren't really grieved at all!" and Sari said, "No, she was beastly to me and I hated her." So of course Solon said, "But then—why?" and Sari answered with, I suppose, the first Sari-ism of them all: it would have been so awful for the aunt, she said, if all those people had realised that no one was sorry she was dead. They were all just strangers, people from the hospital and doctors and so forth, none of them could really care; and here she was, the aunt she meant, at her own funeral and not a single person being sorry. So she'd felt that for *her* sake she ought to put on an act so that they wouldn't realise. She went on explaining earnestly, you know how Sari does; but by that time Solon was interested in only one word. He said: "An act! My dear girl, if that was an act it was the most marvellous performance I've ever seen," and in two seconds flat Sari was out of the graveyard and into his car to be auditioned for *The Spanish Steps*.'

'And he was so right. She was marvellous in the film.'

'Yes, well—she was naughty,' said Etho, explaining as usual. 'She got tied up with this wretched young princeling—an enormous and splendid young man I must say he was, and heir to the dukedom of San Juan el Pirata—'

‘Where on earth is that?’

‘Well, it’s not on earth, it’s in the sea, actually. An island; off the Italian coast somewhere, founded by some old Spanish pirate hundreds of years ago; they speak something called Juanese, a fine old mixture of Spanish and Italian....’

‘I’ve never even heard of it.’

‘Nobody ever did, but it’s there; like Andorra and Monaco and all those. Ruled over by this Hereditary Grand Duke, a huge and terrifying gentleman, making up his own rules as he goes along, and fantastically rich. But anyway, Sari gets tangled up with the heir, there’s a semi-secret marriage and she’s forever playing hookey and she finally disappeared altogether, leaving God knows what retakes and what-nots to be done. And good she may have been, but after all she was brand new, an amateur, the company hadn’t spent a lot of money on her yet and if she wasn’t going to behave, she wasn’t going to be worth exploiting. And then Solon died and that was the end of it.’

‘But what does she live on? I mean, it’s no business of mine,’ said Nan, ‘but she’s such a wonderful person, one can’t help being interested in her; and her finances do seem rather curious. All this is four years ago? Did she have a contract?’

They were turning into the winding drive that led up to the flats. ‘Yes, she had a five-year contract but that doesn’t amount to much; she was an amateur and Solon was no sentimentalist. But the aunt left money, bags of it; only, true to form, with a very tight will, and tied up and doled out to Sari in dribs and drabs. I must say, some of the dribs seems reasonably handsome - look at her flat, the trustees pay up for that, and when she wants a new car, it’s true she has to apply to them, but look what she gets! And even the

spending allowance is jolly good, I think, but she flings it about, she fantastically generous, presies right, left and centre, and then she's broke for the rest of the time.' He swung the car round in front of the main entrance to the flats. 'I wonder if the famous exchange has been made yet? That certainly looks like the nose of her car sticking out of the shed over there; but of course it was another Halcyon she swapped with.'

'If she swapped at all,' said Nan. It was odd how they all took it for granted that Sari might be telling lies; and calmly accepted the fact.

Sari's flat was to Nan an Aladdin's cave of wonder—where the arrangement of the treasures was, however, by no means universally successful. The rooms were big, solid and handsome, their windows looking out and down to the Hampstead ponds, over the vast slopes of the Heath where, on this sunlit autumn morning succeeding the storm, the turning leaves set all the landscape afire. But if Sari saw anything that appealed to her, it seemed, she simply acquired it and tumbled it in with the rest—purple with rose red, velvet with hessian, old with new: nor was she precisely a fastidious housewife. There was a sense of relaxation, nevertheless: people did exactly what they pleased there, friends moved in and out, stayed a night or a week, or as in the case of Rufie, a year—moved off, taking with them anything they particularly fancied, leaving possessions of their own behind. Sari was a great starter of unfinished projects, mostly undertaken for other people; a half-made kaftan for Sofy was at this moment in the sewing machine in the middle of the sitting-room floor—for weeks, no doubt, everyone would move round it, before anyone thought of picking up its enormous folds and putting the

whole lot away. Lumps of modelling clay half formed into fantastic figures were pushed to one side of the dining-table, burnt-down candles glued by their own wax to the marble mantelshelf after an orgy of Batik work to make a tremendously original nightshirt for Rufie. About the whole thing there was a sort of mad beauty: and wandering through the centre of it, totally unconscious of any peculiarity in her rooms or in herself, Sari, most beautiful of all.

She received with rapture their contributions to the luncheon; and Pony was bringing in some stuff from the Italiano shop on the corner. ‘You don’t know Pony yet, Nan, we haven’t known him all that long ourselves and he’s been away and come back. But we all do rather love him, he’s so neat and pretty and terrifically clean, one simply can’t help it. At first we all thought he had jaundice but no, no, he turned out to be one of those rather yellow Italians, it’s the Neapolitan sun, you know. Isn’t he, Rufie?’ she called out across the kaftan and sewing machine. ‘Neapolitan or something?’

‘Something like that,’ said Rufie, pouring drinks.

‘Rufie produced him from somewhere. In fact,’ said Sari, slightly lowering her voice, ‘we imagine he’s one of the fire-escape Visitors, but nobody says so, so we don’t enquire.’ Rufie kept his private life to himself and that was all right with everybody. Live and let live.

And Charley. Charley was quite a long-time member of the Eight Best, but he had been away on holiday and only just this minute got back from Peshawar or wherever it was—the group never let on that they knew perfectly well that in fact it was from his devoted Pakistani family in Liverpool. If he wanted to tell them about ranees and his adventures in

Be Kind to Snakes Week in Bombay, if he wanted to bring them slender glass bangles and teeny carved bone elephants which opened up and had millions of much teenier (well, obviously) carved bone elephants inside them, all easily recognisable as coming from The Souk in Oxford Street - well, that was OK by them. He only did it to make things more romantic for himself and all of them. His name was Achmed Ramid Singh really—except that *really* it was Charles Windsor Singh, loyally named by his recently immigrant parents after Our Own Dear Prince. Sari had picked him up at a grand but horrible party where he had been left sitting apart, made to feel very second-class citizen. She had gone straight across to him, sat down beside him and put her own lovely hand, palm upturned, into his beautiful smooth brown hand and said, ‘Tell me my fortune!’ Charley, as lucky as Nan upon her first introduction, had said the one witty thing he proved ever to have said in his life: ‘It iss your fortune to be always the most pretty lady in the room,’ and had added in astonishment, ‘Why do you ask me? I am not fortune-teller.’ ‘I know,’ Sari had said, ‘but there’s no way like it for making friends and influencing people,’ and she had given him a rapid sketch of the home lives of several fellow guests and then leapt to her feet and cried out that he had told her the most amazing things and was an absolute genius, muttering a hasty aside that if the wrong ones came he should just say in a superior voice, ‘Not interesting!’ and push the hand aside. Charley, who had a quite excellent intelligence, had caught on like lightning and become the pet of the evening; and ever since had worshipped her like a goddess, and so wormed his way into the affections of the circle. He was in fact an intensely boring young man; but they loved him because never, never, never was he bored himself, so deeply

and devotedly was he interested in all that concerned these wonderful people among whom, by some gift direct from God—um, Allah—he had found himself a place; and such inflammable enthusiasm was as endearing as the same sort of thing, in its more temperate degree, in Nan. His accent was a curious mixture of Liverpool Scouse and Pakistani, the accent upon the first syllable. He was studying with all his eager heart to be a doctor, praying to stay on at one of the London hospitals and continue his treasured situation among the blest. ‘Virryvirry happy to be seeing you all. I am bringing only small contribution; today I am not in millionaire top-storey class.’ He did not add that to pay for the small contribution, he would tomorrow be obliged to go without food altogether. ‘You are most beautiful today,’ he said to Sari, stooping down to take her hand in his own two smooth brown hands and kissing the backs of her fingers. ‘Oh, Charley,’ she said, ‘you *are* such a love!’

And Sofy arrived. ‘Sofa darling, you’re wearing the Jade Elephant coat! You’ve never seen it yet, Nan, but isn’t it splendid?—gloriously fat-making.’

‘Yes, the BBC are rivvied by it, they say I need only put on two pounds now by Tuesday, instead of four....’

Faint as a wafting of thistledown, a memory flickered in Sari’s mind and was gone again. ‘Look what they’ve brought in for lunch, Etho and Nan—’

‘—and here is Pony with even more,’ said Pony himself, coming in with a huge, steaming bowl of spaghetti direct from the Italiano shop. Why he should be called Pony, nobody had any idea.

Sofy’s eyes glistened. ‘Ap-solutely pounds and pounds of fat and all for free. I do thank you all!’

‘Any work going, my dovey-darling?’

‘Nothing that one could dignify by the name. But this vague hope for the future and I think the Jade Elephant distinctly improved its chances.’

‘Poor Sofy, you shall be gathering up all what’s left and taking it home with you,’ said Pony.

‘Nothing ever is left,’ said Etho. ‘Sofa gathers it all up anyway, and takes it home by turn.’

‘Yes, well it’s all right for you lot, but there’s still my extra two pounds and by Tuesday.’

‘Well, then, tomorrow night I take you to Italian restaurant for big blow-out?’

‘Oh, *please* don’t, Pony, we shall have to subscribe to a presie for you too, for being so kind to Sofy!’

‘Two of Pony’s Italian blow-outs two days running’, said Etho, ‘would surely kill even Sofa. Personally after this I’m going for a long convalescent walk on the Heath.’

Everyone thought this was a splendid idea except Sofy who dared not risk losing an ounce of newly acquired precious fat. ‘And I must wait in for my car man,’ said Sari.

Furtive glances all round. Etho said in his easy way, ‘Oh darling—you’ve just been having Rufie on about your car man?’

She seemed to grow rigid, sitting, perched cross-legged, on an outsize velvet cushion, the bowl of spaghetti in her hand. ‘You don’t believe me, do you? You never believe me.’

Etho said again: ‘We thought it was just a joke.’

‘But it wasn’t a joke. The tree fell across the road and we were both in a frantic hurry, so I changed with this man.’

‘But why should you be in such a hurry?’ said Nan.

She sat there, carved in ebony and ivory, pale face, black sequin monkey, all topped with amber aflame. Eyes

shadowed—frightened. ‘If I do tell you, Nan, none of them will believe it. I was being followed. Someone had been watching me down at the theatre and now they were following me.’

‘Someone watching you? Someone following you?’ said Pony, incredulous.

‘Sari has a sort of—fear—of being followed,’ said Etho. He said to her, very sweetly, ‘It’s so easy, if one’s afraid of something, darling, to imagine—’

‘I tricked the car,’ said Sari. ‘I slowed down and *it* slowed down. I raced ahead and *it* kept up with me. A little black mini—’

‘Well, there you are, darling, a mini keeping up with a Cadmus 3000.’

‘It could be hotted up,’ said Sari. ‘Yours is hotted up, Rufie.’ It was one of Rufie’s private jokes to idle along in front of a more powerful car until the driver got sick of him and shot ahead with a triumphant backward glance; and then to step on the gas and sweep past in his turn.

‘But Sari dear,’ said Nan, greatly daring, ‘why should people follow you?’ Unless, she added, trying to lighten the sudden unease that had fallen upon them all, it was fellers trying to get another glimpse of so much gorgeousness.

Sari said simply as she had said to the man in the pub, ‘They want to kill me.’

The silence of chill incredulity fell like a thud. She got up to her feet and stood there looking down at them: cold—lonely—frightened. None of them believed her, she must live through it all alone, all the sickness, the terror, the persistent dread. She said: ‘Well, some of it at least I can prove to you. Come down and look at the car. You’ll see it’s not mine.’

‘Oh, *darling*,’ said Sofy, protesting. ‘We haven’t even finished our dins.’

Rufie stood up. ‘I’ll come with you, love.’ You could see him thinking that if it proved in fact to be her own car, as of course it would, he could smooth down the breaking of the news to the rest of them, make a rueful joke of it, say it had been a jolly good act last night, and ap-solutely taken him in.... He went into her room and brought back a huge purple shawl and, putting one arm round her waist, hitched it across their shoulders and went off with her. The others, watching from the window a little apprehensively, saw them emerge like a huge, curious beetle with two small heads—one dark, glowing marmalade, one a pale flare of red—on four thin black legs, and make their somewhat unsteady way across to the row of parked cars. Nan said, ever practical: ‘Why don’t they just check the number plate?’

‘My dear, Sari had her last car for three years and never to the end knew what the number was.’

‘Of course it may be true about the tree?’

‘It may be. What isn’t true’, said Sofy, ‘is that Sari was being followed. She’s been followed, off and on, ever since we’ve known her. Hasn’t she, Etho? Even in those days at the studio.’

‘She used to say so sometimes,’ said Etho, never to be drawn.

The purple beetle had come to the line of cars. Rufie’s arm tightened beneath the woolly shawl. ‘If it’s your car, darling, don’t worry. We’ll just say you were having me on.’

‘Oh, Rufie, for heaven’s sake! Don’t treat me like an idiot child!’ said Sari. ‘I swapped with the man at the tree. I was being followed and I was frightened, and to get away from them I swapped with the man at the tree.’ She left the

shelter of the shawl and pushed forward between the big Halcyon and his little black mini, flung open the passenger door. 'There you are! Nothing of mine. It's not my car.' Not that there had been anything of hers in her own car but there must be a sort of- feel. The light had come on automatically and she took a further step forward and yanked open the rear door also. 'And nothing there either—'

But there was something there. Something crouched, huddling, on the floor behind the driving seat, that flung out a clawed white hand, sick white as the sick white underbelly of a fish, and clutched at the black sequin monkey swarming up the black velvet trouser leg.... Something lying there, wedged down into that narrow space, that must have lain there all night—waiting: mottled face upturned, witless eyes uprolled, scrawny legs bent, stiffened hand outflung with the release of the opening door.... The blonde hair, dark parted, hung brassy, damp and unkempt; the tail of the pale blue plastic mackintosh was ruckled up on the seat behind, with a cheap little red woolly cap to match cheap little red woolly gloves. The throat and shoulders were rigid, the breastbone like a poor, plucked fowl, thrust up, unbeautifully exposed above the rim of beaded pink silk and a tawdry pink cardigan and the blue plastic mac. And on the pale, shining surface of the plastic, a bright dark patch of crimson lay like a fallen rose.

Vi Feather. Vi Feather who just a few hours before had sat with those little clawed hands scraping in the money, behind her cage at the Wren's Hill cinema—lying there dead, murdered, huddled obscenely in the back of the stranger's car, with the white light glaring down upon her terrible face.

5

THE INVESTIGATION OF A CRIME, said Mr Charlesworth, pontificating, as they drove up to Hampstead—he was Detective Chief Superintendent now, and a little inclined to show off—was like reconstructing a collage which had been torn to pieces and distributed to the four winds. An area—and you didn't even know its boundaries—was scattered over with hundreds and thousands of little bits and pieces, some of which, but by no means all of which, belonged to the original picture. And the little bits were all different: bits of stone, bits of stuff—bits of fur, bits of feather—bits of hair, bits of—

‘Haddock,’ suggested Sergeant Ellis before he could stop himself.

‘Haddock?’

‘I got caught up in the rhythm, sir, and the alliteration. Sorry.’ All the same, thought Sergeant Ellis, privately grinning to himself, the skin of a fine Finney haddock would make a splendid contribution to old Charlesworth’s artistic endeavours.

—and all these bits and pieces you must gather together, patiently seeking them out, chancing your arm as to whether or not they are going to fit into the picture; and patiently, painfully sort and separate them, the discards, the possibles, the probables, the certainties—and jiggle and fiddle them around until at last, by gradual degrees, they begin to build up to the picture you had in your mind....

‘Only of course, sir, like you were saying the other day—the important thing is *not* to have a picture in your mind. Not preconceived.’

'Quite right, quite right,' said Charlesworth, resorting in extremity to kindly patronage. 'All I mean is that there *is* a picture—the picture of exactly what happened. And with all these bits and pieces, that's what you're trying to put together.' And a picture, he suggested, in the end proves to have been based upon a certain composition. The same with a crime. The motive. Or a state of mind. Or simply some impulse, generated by fortuitous opportunity. 'Something triggers off a murder, something impels it on forward and follows it through. That's what'll show up, that's what forms the composition of your picture. Once get the composition, the shape of your collage, and all the little bits and pieces begin to fall into place. Like an archaeologist, building up the whole structure of ancient man from a single tooth. From the tooth he deduces the size of the jaw, and from the jaw he deduces the shape of the head, and from the head—'

A minute ago it had been chips of stone and scraps of fur not to mention the haddock, to be reduced down to a collage; now it was a single tooth to be built up to all the bits and pieces comprising a skeleton. 'Yessir,' said Sergeant Ellis reverently, just not quite physically twiddling his thumbs.

Mr Charlesworth, perhaps a mite hastily, abandoned pithecanthropoid man in favour of return to the picture. For the great thing was, he said, that one must remember that the very smallest piece of material, however insignificant, apparently colourless, apparently shapeless, however much just a scrap of the general hopeless muddle - was never too unimportant to be considered. Who knew that this or that tuft of feather, this or that fragment of coloured glass, might not be at the very basis of the pattern they were searching for...?

He might have instanced—had he been there to hear it

—Sari's discussion with Rufie about the present for Nan.

Down on the tarmac they were swarming all around the Halcyon, measuring, photographing, fingerprinting, easing out the terrible, stiffened figure from its cramped quarters, carrying it, grotesquely shaped beneath its mercifully covering sheet, to the waiting ambulance. In the big flat, seven storeys up, above the glowing vistas of the Heath, Chief Superintendent Charlesworth stood, somewhat dazed, and looked them over.

A rather pretty, plump early-middle-aged woman in garments so conventional as to seem positively *outré* in this improbable setting, hanging on to her control but in a terrible condition of nerves and upset. A younger woman, very pretty indeed with the prettiness of the enormously fat, wrapped in a sort of loose cover, brilliantly green, wobbling like a blancmange in an abandonment of hysterical tears. A tall thin man, dark, balding a little, dressed in the height of male fashion—unless, like Mr Charlesworth, you considered the height of male fashion to be a decently cut suit, fresh shirt and sufficiently agreeable tie. An Italian, very small and neat, at least more conventionally garbed; query Queer? And a short, slender man of about thirty—no query about *him*—with a curiously, white skin and a pale, pale flame of red hair, who sat in a sort of stupor, staring ahead of him, one trembling arm, a-jangle with gold and silver bracelets, round the exquisite shoulders of Miss Sari Morne.

And Miss Sari Morne.

If a middle-aged, heavily married Detective Chief Superintendent of Her Majesty's Metropolitan Police Force may be permitted to have fallen in love at first sight, let

alone with Suspect (so far) Number One, Detective Chief Superintendent Charlesworth had fallen in love. He concealed his passion with practised control—from nobody but himself. Those present were all too well aware of the immediate response, when confronted with Miss Sari Morne, of the infatuate male.

Nor was Sergeant Ellis deceived. Sergeant Ellis had packed into his comparatively short life a quite astonishing amount of reading, travel and experience and was no man's fool. He was a rotund young man, oddly short in the leg from the knee down, full of rather endearing mannerisms of speech and habit, and with a cropped mop of hair of a colour which caused him to be known far and wide with no great originality as Ginger. He took one look at Mr Charlesworth's sagging face and thought with unwonted straightforwardness (for he had a somewhat coky mind): Poor old bugger, he's gone and got it again.

'I'd better talk to you, Miss Morne, first, please. If your friends could wait somewhere else.' It had all been gone over in a general gabble of information but now things must be sorted out. 'Sergeant—?'

Ginger whipped out his notebook and pencil and stood with slightly bowed head, a greyhound in the slips. He habitually enlivened his daily round with small private jokes and it amused him intensely to put on such hardly discernible parades of self mockery.

'We'll go into the dining-room, Sari?' suggested Etho.

Rufie looked miserably at Sari. 'Can't I stay with her? I don't like her being on her own. I mean, you don't know how horrible—'

Sari, however, had emerged from her original condition of total shock into something almost frighteningly like euphoria. 'I'm all right, darling, ap-solutely. You look after

poor Nan, she's the one that needs it, she's not used to this kind of thing.'

'Well, it's hardly an everyday affair for us either,' said Rufie, rather tartly. Damn it, Nan had not had to see it—that pink and blue spider with its horribly bent arms and legs. And the great splodge of blood that had turned out to be... Turned out to be... Something stirred in his mind, an uneasy feeling of something that had happened—that he had done something, moved something, changed something which now in all the shock and terror had clean gone out of his mind. Perhaps Sari would remember. He'd have to ask her afterwards, secretly—you got into trouble if you interfered with things 'at the scene of the crime'.

Sari, left alone with the law, sat curled at one end of the long studio couch, chain-smoking as usual. She had changed her clothes—the bare thought of that dead claw brushing against her trouser leg!—and was now in deep blue linen jeans, whose fit played havoc with Mr Charlesworth's efforts to remain unmoved; and another of her vast sweaters, this time in emerald green. 'Now if I might have some details? You call yourself Miss Sari Morne but you are really—?'

'La Carissima—Principessa di San Juan el Pirata,' said Sari crisply.

'Principessa—?'

'Sacarissima, Carissima, Altessissima; and Perla del Isla to boot. I never know whether Sacarissima means the holiest or the most sugary.'

'Sacred or profane?' suggested Sergeant Ellis, almost entirely to himself. Sari bent upon him an appreciative eye.

'You have the title of Princess, Miss Morne?'

'I was married to Aldo Lorenzo, the heir to the dukedom of San Juan. I don't suppose you've ever heard of

it, but like Liechtenstein and Andorra and for that matter Monaco—it's there.'

'Where exactly is there?' said Mr Charlesworth.

'In the Mediterranean, off the coast of Italy. Somewhere round Elba and those islands. I wouldn't know exactly, I've never been there. But it's a great mix-up of Spanish and Italian and they speak Juanese which nobody but themselves would even want to understand. Except for the aristocracy who speak practically everything *but*. In fact Aldo's mother isn't Juanese at all—I believe she's French.'

'You don't seem very closely familiar with your in-laws?'

'No, no, I married their precious Principe somewhat under the rose, appropriately enough as the rose is the emblem of San Juan. And where is the said Principe now? you may well ask. Well, frankly, I don't know. He may be in San Juan itself, where in every sense, I must say, he belongs, but on the other hand, he may well be over here, hunting me down with the aid of his own dear private and personal Mafia. The Red Mafia they call it, to distinguish it from the ordinary Italian Mafia, Mafia Rossa—as I said, the rose is the national emblem of the island.'

'And the Prince is over here?' said Charlesworth, his head lightly spinning.

'Well, more likely in Italy in fact. He's in the process of becoming engaged—betrothed we call it in our more exalted circles—to an Italian young lady of lineage reputed more ancient than his own, give or take a thousand years or so.'

'More give than take,' suggested Sergeant Ellis, tempering the intrusion by making a little offering of information to his superior, like a cat laying a dead mouse at the feet of its master. He recited like a schoolboy: 'The

island of San Juan was appropriated as a stronghold in 1762, so only a couple of *hundred* years—by Juan Lorenzo, a Spanish pirate—'

‘—and his fearsome crew,’ said Sari. ‘Which is what they remain to this day, including my dear husband, the unregretted Aldo.’

‘Oh,’ said Charlesworth, more and more disturbed by all this gratuitous flippancy; and indeed not too sure that the lady—let alone his own sergeant—was not having him on. He suggested: ‘I take it that you are no longer married to him?’

‘No, that lasted about one minute. So we can drop him and his titles and go back to the number you first thought of. My name and address? My name is Sari Morne and this is my address and that is not my car.’

‘But your real name—before marriage, I mean—?’

‘Maria Bloggs,’ said Sari. She repeated: ‘And this is my address and that is *not* my car.’

‘So you explained to me earlier. Could we go through it all again please, now that things have—calmed down.’

‘I’m sorry if I was slightly hysterical at first.’

‘This was all a total shock and surprise to you?’

‘As my chum has just remarked,’ said Sari, ‘not exactly a daily occurrence.’

Almost as though to reassure himself, Charlesworth looked at the traces of the tears that had ravaged that beautiful face. An extraordinary girl. Everyone else had made a dive for the decanter and duly showed signs of it, but not she. Arriving within a few minutes of their ‘phone call, he had watched her shudderingly pulling herself together, by slow degrees forcing herself to this resolute, this almost cynical display of tranquillity, even of levity. ‘Well—now, once again, from the beginning.’

They had been over it, all of them, though sketchily, several times already. 'You drove down to Wren's Hill—why?'

'To see myself in this picture I made four years ago. I told you.'

'You went alone?'

'One doesn't want one's Eight Best Friends around, all saying how marvellous one was and thinking how one has gone off since.' She concentrated on lighting the next cigarette from the one she was smoking.

'And while there you spoke to the deceased?'

'I passed a few remarks, as the deceased herself would certainly have expressed it. She'd been a dresser at the studio when I was working here and in Italy. I hadn't seen her since.'

'But you knew her quite well at the time?'

'No, I didn't. She was a horrid little thing, even then. But there she was, so I said hallo.'

'Just hallo?'

'Well, yes. She told me she'd given up the job and was living with her pore old mother, tried to touch me for a fiver, I gave her a quid and walked away, and that was about the lot.'

'She asked for money?'

'Unlike her more recent appearance, that *would* be an everyday occurrence.'

'Did anyone overhear this conversation?'

'People came and bought tickets but I don't suppose they tickly listened. It was hardly a riveting exchange.'

'Did anything else occur at the cinema?'

'No. Well, I banged into a man and said sorry and he said sorry and then I sat through the film and came away by a side entrance, not particularly desiring to bang into Miss

Feather as well.'

'And you didn't see her again?'

'No, nor anyone else. At least not to speak to,' said Sari carefully.

'But you did see somebody?'

'I saw somebody following me,' said Sari, 'when I was driving home. But there's no use telling you that. I told you before and you didn't believe me and I'm sure you won't now.'

'In what way, following you?'

'In a very dangerous way, following me.'

'But who would this be?'

'I don't know. But I should imagine the Red Mafia, with Aldo at their head, or rather prodding them on from a safe place in the rear.'

'Something to do with your marriage, then?'

'It began about that time,' said Sari. (In Rome: making the picture on location in Rome—those odd, sharp-shouldered, olive-complexioned men always around every corner, dodging out of sight... Someone in the cinema last night had dodged out of sight. As she was buying her ticket, seen vaguely out of the corner of her eye. But that hadn't been some impersonal hired assassin, there had been something vaguely familiar, a flash of colour, had it been?—something vaguely close to home...)

'And over the four years since then, people have been—following you?'

'Only on and off,' said Sari. (The same sort of strange men hanging about the convent when she'd been having... The nuns had been angels of goodness, keeping her safe and close, keeping her secrets: her secrets and Aldo's.)

Charlesworth sat in the big armchair, staring back at her. He said at last: 'But these people—your husband's

people—?’

‘The marriage was not precisely the event of the year for them, was it? Their princeling and heir with a tuppenny little film starlet. They’re fabulously rich, unimaginably rich and, pirate ancestor or not, nowadays terribly grand.’

‘Yes, but—’ He said again, helplessly. ‘People in that sort of position—you were divorced from their son, you were over and finished with: what harm could they wish you?’

‘They could wish me dead,’ said Sari.

But it was Vi Feather who was dead.

Vi Feather. Dead, murdered, lying scrunched up and horrible in that narrow space at the back of the car. Sari lifted her head. She said: ‘So you see it *was* all true, wasn’t it? They did want to kill me, didn’t they? Only they got poor Vi Feather by mistake.’

The long afternoon waned away and with it something of that almost chilling frivolity and insouciance. He took her through the adventure of the tree, her return home, and she answered quietly and rationally. No stranger turned up, meanwhile, to collect the Halcyon; she seemed to have the wrong telephone number, she had thrown the piece of paper away. She refused absolutely to remember her own registration number, couldn’t find the log book, had never had any log book, was ap-solutely certain... The Halcyon was a brand new model, just out, and specifications of owners had not yet found their way into the police machine. He’d check it in the end, of course, but meanwhile—what a nuisance women were! He sent her back for a further search of the big, scattered, untidy apartment and talked in turn briefly to the widow, to the fat girl, to the Italian. The Italian came from the south, had met them only recently—through Mr Rufie Soames who had spoken to him at a—

well, at a club. Mr Ethelbert Wendover, however, had known her from her filming days, conceded cagily that she had been a bit difficult—she was a nervy, temperamental creature and had made like a film star and, so early in her career, didn't get away with it. Yes, it was true about the young prince—a very young prince indeed; she had met him at the studio, through a friend, and really he had been at the root of the trouble, always tempting her to play hookey. Yes, one understood that she had actually married him. Divorced? Well, annulled: there was no divorce in San Juan which was a Catholic country. Mr Charlesworth opined airily that anyway, with these papists, it was just a matter of handing over a bundle of used notes, wasn't it?—and the Pope fixed all the rest. Mr Ethelbert Wendover smiled upon him with a kindly pity.

The Chief Superintendent put them all on ice and sent for Rufie.

Rufie had swallowed down about a million tranquillisers but they hadn't mixed too well with the first frantic swiggings of brandy and he simply couldn't get back into self-control. Beneath the pale flare of Shelley-like locks, his face was ashen, white hands clenched so tightly that the rings bit sharply into his shaking fingers. Yes, he'd gone round to Etho's last night, just to—well, just to talk and play records. Yes, despite the weather; he didn't mind storms—some people were terrified of storms but he thought they were rather fun, and after all, how many of all the millions of people ever got struck by lightning? ...Yes, he'd known Sari from her filming days, only slightly then but he'd got in touch through Etho when she came to London and kept up with her ever since; she was so gorgeous, so sweet, so absolutely special... Yes, he supposed you could say he'd

known Vi Feather in those days too but not tickly well, not as a person—he'd been working on the costume designs and after all she'd been only a dresser. No, for heaven's sake, never set eyes on her since, not until—not until today... No, the Halcyon hadn't been there when he got home last night, he'd already told them that a thousand times; and yes, Sari had arrived back soon after he did. Yes, she told him about the stranger and the fallen tree. And about being followed. He fell suddenly into a terrible weeping. 'We never believed her when she said all these things about being followed, people wanting to kill her and all that. But see what's happened now!' And he looked as though he would be sick, would vomit up into the hand clapped over his mouth; blue eyes blurred and staring. 'Supposing it had been Sari! All huddled up there, so—disgusting... We were all so wrong, we did nothing to help her.' Suppose it had been Sari, lovely, beautiful, darling Sari! He got up and blundered away so that the handsome Chief Superintendent shouldn't see him blowing his nose, so unromantic! 'I'm sorry,' he said, returning, the tears drying on his white cheek bones. 'I took all these pills and on top of alcohol you simply go beresk.' Rufie's top favourite word with the Eight Best Friends was beresk; they were terrified of his finding out that he said it wrong and always used his pronunciation themselves, considerably to the astonishment of those outside the secret.

Two small components, light as air, of Mr Charlesworth's collage floated across his line of vision and out again. He grabbed at them mentally, but they were gone. Oh, well, he thought, I'll switch off and they'll come back to me when I'm not thinking about it. He brought Mr Soames back to cases. 'If Miss Morne is telling the truth, then this is the stranger's car?'

Well of course, said Rufie, staring. One had to believe that now. How else could...? He made a gesture of repugnance. 'How else could—it—have got there? Poor Sari just drove back not knowing it was there.'

'But how could this woman's body have got into his car? He was coming back *towards* Wren's Hill. The woman was working there in the cinema.'

'I suppose', said Rufie intelligently, 'that a cashier doesn't stay till the end of the evening. After the feature film started, she'd pack up, hand over the takings and go home. And if he—well, met her, or took her, or whatever you like—beyond where the tree fell later, on the London side—' That, suggested Rufie, could be why he was in such a panic to get on.

'Turning his car over to an unknown woman, complete with dead Miss Feather in the back of it?'

'And then doing a bunk? You may never hear from him again.'

This possibility had not escaped Mr Charlesworth who had already set on foot suitable arrangements; though in view of Sari's total lack of any help in identifying the stranger, it had hardly been a promising outlook. Yes, he'd given her a 'phone number but the paper had got all wet, you couldn't make it out properly and the wrong people kept answering, so she'd chucked it away—he'd get in touch with her. As for his appearance, he'd been tall but otherwise she'd no idea what he had looked like. They'd both had their hats pulled down over their ears, coat collars turned up, heads bent down to keep the wind from absolutely blowing their eyelashes back into their eyes; it had been pitch dark and teeming with rain and most of the time they'd had a vast great fallen tree between them, branches and the lot. There was nothing in the way of personal

property in his car, as there had been nothing in her own; neither car could have been on the roads for more than a week or two at most. So all that was a great help! Charlesworth's men would be coping with fingerprints and all the rest of it, and of course they would soon check on the owner of the car. But by that time, as Rufie had said, the stranger, if he existed, might be anywhere.

If he had existed. Mr Charlesworth, with regrettable reluctance, gave himself over to consideration of the possibility that he never had existed—that this was Sari Morne's own car.

Vi Feather had come up out of the past—the somewhat mysterious past with its marriage into an unwelcoming nobility, its history of nameless threats and followings. She had asked for money. Blackmail? But then would Sari have mentioned it?—there had been no need. Unless of course she had known, though she now denied it, that someone had been listening who might later inform on her. 'Contents of handbag?' he said, slightly challengingly to Sergeant Ellis.

But Ginger by name, ginger by nature; the sergeant was by no means always playing games. He listed without troubling to refer to the paper he held, a collection of Miss Feather's possessions: cosmetics, toilet tissues, comb, mirror, plastic coin purse, unremarkable for anything but a universal grubbiness. There had been an imitation leather notecase with odds and ends of paper in it and a single pound note. There was a good deal of small change loose in the bottom of the handbag, and a crumpled note, pushed down at one side. That sounded as though money had in fact been handed over and thrust, perhaps hastily, furtively, into the handbag; but Miss Sari Morne would hardly be susceptible to blackmail to the tune of a single pound note.

On the other hand... First instalment? A 'refresher'? Had Vi perhaps waited outside the cinema—for her outer clothes had been wet through—and then made the demand? Been in the car perhaps from the beginning, from the beginning of the drive home?

'Result of telephone call to the pub, sir,' said Ginger, turning over the pages of another report. 'Landlord looked into the car, took a particular interest because it was the new Cadmus Halcyon. Looked well into the interior; can swear there was nobody there, and no body either, not even lying on the floor behind the front seat, or he'd have seen it.' The lady had brought the car close up to the door so as to have the shortest distance to run in out of the rain, and he'd been able to see all over it. Looked with special interest to see what leg room there was at the back: a lot of these posh cars failed in that. Agreed that a body might lie there unobserved by the driver, unobserved by anybody getting in and out of the driving seat—especially hastily, coming in out of the dark in all that storm; but when the car drove away from his pub, there'd been nothing there, nobody there.

Hidden in the boot then, perhaps? But why move it from that hiding place to another so much less secure? Ginger with maddening efficiency whipped out the relevant report. No sign whatsoever—in this brand new, unmarked car—of anything ever having been in the boot, let alone a body, the clothes soaked with rain.

She hadn't been killed in the car. Strangled, but not in the car: not, for example, killed in the front passenger seat and hauled or pushed over to lie in the back. No: she had, they thought, been dead before she was put there. The murderer had opened the offside door and pushed in the body as far as it would go, and then, most likely, gone

round to the other door and dragged it the rest of the way. But she had definitely been dead by then; perhaps quite a long time dead. Speaking off the top of his head, said the doctor, and without benefit of post mortem—she had died some time before midnight.

She had been out in the storm. The rain had run off the shiny surface of the plastic mac, but the mac was smeared with mud; shoes, woollen gloves, even the horrid matching little woollen cap, all thick with still damp mud. Hair tousled, hanging over her face. A hand-to-hand struggle? Well, could be. But equally, a struggle through the storm, stumbling, tripping perhaps, throwing out a gloved hand to stop herself from falling, actually falling, muddying her coat, the woolly cap tumbling off, being clapped back again over the streaming wet hair...

But where? But when?

Waiting by the roadside? Had Sari found her waiting by the roadside, somewhere between the pub and home—and leapt out into the rain and strangled the woman and dragged her into concealment at the back of the car? But why do such a thing? Why not leave the body where it fell? Why strangle her anyway?—with a big, powerful car at one's disposal, with a storm of rain to wash away all signs, why not just run the woman down and leave her lying? 'Call Mr Soames back here a moment,' said Charlesworth.

Rufie had sat all this time at the far end of the room in a dream of abstraction, his white face, like the face of a mime, expressionless, almost witless, staring into space. Charlesworth said: 'When Miss Morne came in last night—of course she would have been wet through?'

'Soaked,' said Rufie. 'I had to rub her down like a horse, poor love, and a great double brandy, a thing she simply never touches in the ordinary way.'

‘And covered in mud?’

‘Well, her boots of course, and they were clean when she went out, I did them for her myself this morning—she’s so naughty about her things and they’re so gorgeous, all that lovely leather, Gucci, you know; madly expensive but I always tell her, it’s so much worth it.’

Such devotion to Sari’s wardrobe might well prove instructive. ‘And her beautiful leather coat?’ said Charlesworth, guilelessly. ‘I noticed it hanging up to dry. Muddy too?’

‘Well, not to say muddy, but all smeared with green, and scraped, too tragic. Which shows how wicked it was of me’, said Rufie, ‘not to have realised that it was true about the tree. It must all have come from pushing through to the other side. And her gloves too, the leather all scratched.’

Had Vi Feather fought back for her life, against the choking hands in their wet leather driving gloves? ‘A good thing Miss Morne happened to be wearing—them,’ said Charlesworth, rather unhappily.

‘Well, but my *dear*, on a night like that—’

‘I only mean that she might have got her hands scratched.’

‘Oh, that would have been too awful!’ said Rufie. ‘Her hands are so perfect.’ His own right hand had two or three strange little scratches across the back of it and he very, very surreptitiously pulled down his cuff to cover them. But he was immeasurably thankful for his beloved Sari. ‘You see she did force her way past the tree, after all. She did meet the stranger. It *isn’t her car*,’ he said.

She came into the room. The long legs were slender in their tight blue jeans, the brilliant green woolly, deliciously top-heavy above them. Her hair stood on end, lit from beneath with its extraordinary glow. She held out a long

pale green card to Charlesworth. 'You kept saying the log-book,' she said. 'This isn't a book. It's just a sort of bit of paper.'

'But it tells us the registration number of your car,' said Charlesworth. 'And the engine number.' He turned away and glanced down into the yard. He said at last: 'The tree fell across the road? And you met this stranger? And you swapped cars?'

'I *told* you,' said Sari.

'And subsequently a dead body is found in the car.' He took her arm and held her while she stood beside him, staring down at the big, shining black Halcyon, out in the open now with the police still milling around it. 'Miss Morne—look at the number plate. That's your own car,' he said.

6

AND DOWN IN WREN'S Hill, Nanny was ringing up Mummy. 'I've got a bit of news for you dear, I think she lives in Grenwidge.'

'In Greenwich?'

'Well, breakfast time this morning, Ena Mee suddenly comes out with, "Where'll we go for our picnic, Daddy?" "Picnic?" he says. "You promised to take me for a picnic today," she says—never a word to me, of course, never a word to Nanny who's got to get the samwidges and that. Well, he looks a bit sick, you could see he had something else up his sleeve, he'd forgotten about the picnic, but she starts creating, "You always break your promises!"—and "Mummy would take me if *she* said she was going to,"' said Nanny, contributing a touch of flattering embroidery which both of them must recognise to be totally false. 'So he says, "I can't," he says, "I've got a case to see,"—always the same old excuse. So Ena Mee, she sets up a hullabaloo, so he sits there thinking and at last he says, "Well, look, all right, I was supposed to be going to Grenwidge to see this patient, so what we'll do, we'll take our picnic to Grenwidge Park, and I'll drop in and see the patient and you and Nanny can wait just a few minutes." Ena Mee says no, she wanted to go to the zoo', but, "It's lovely in Grenwidge Park," he says, "you can sit on the hill and look all the way down to the river." "What, after all that rain last night?" I says. "Why not a nice restrong?" but no, we can take the tarpauling and a picnic it has to be. And I have to say,' admitted Nanny, 'it turned out a nice day after the storm, and not all that cold.'

'Yes, well obviously it was all an excuse to go to

Greenwich. So, Nanny, what about Her? He parked you there and just went off and left you?’

‘Well, he had to tell her he couldn’t manage it after all, I suppose. But pretending it was a patient—But it wasn’t a patient,’ said Nanny, shrewdly, ‘I know *him!* Just come back and says after all that trouble, the patient had gone out, so he just left a message. And I bet she had too, he looked that upset!’

Goodness: thought Ena, listening with only half an ear. Greenwich? She had an idea, though only a very vague one, as to the identity of the lady concerned. That there’d been any lady before she’d left him, was certainly not the case, though she had made considerable parade of jealousy at his seeing all those females and under such intimate conditions, in his consulting rooms. But afterwards... Well, Phin was a bit of a one for it; and doctors, especially gynaecologists, had to be very, very careful about dalliance with their patients; and, especially again, with young married patients. If she could discover that Phin had been up to something of the sort, then the law would be willing to hand Ena Mee back to her Mum. Not that Ena had the smallest intention, whatever Nanny might imagine, of lumbering herself again with a six-year-old child, and Ronald would certainly never stand for it—but by pretending to want her, she could blackmail lots and lots of lovely lolly out of Phin. Ronald was loaded, but had proved not all that generous, after all, in doling it out to the little woman. ‘Well, so what did you have for the picnic then, Nan?’ (Greenwich Park. She must be one of his Harley Streeters, sent to him by a general practitioner. The hospital where Phin was consultant was in North London, which was why he chose to live out in Hertfordshire; and Greenwich, after all, just about slap opposite, a good twelve miles away, the other side of

London. The lady would not come to him via a North London hospital. A small contribution to Mr Charlesworth's collage floated through Ena's cunning mind; she was unconscious that it was this that had prompted her to ask what they'd had for the picnic.)

'Oh, well, the picnic,' said Nanny, flattered. One of Mummy's charms had been that she always said that Nanny's fixing-uppings for all special occasions were so marvellous that she would leave everything to her—by which Ena in fact meant all the work and trouble. 'Well, you know what our young lady is about a picnic. Them little soft rolls spread with Lipter cheese. Wouldn't touch them if you gave them to her in the house, but for a picnic—Lipter cheese it has to be. "But, petty," I says to her, "Nanny hasn't got any Lipter cheese." "You can get it in the shop," she says; and Sunday, but no flies on our young Madam, "The dellycatessing's open on Sundays," she says. Well, I 'd been up half the night, dear, what with my tooth, but never mind that, down to the shop poor Nanny has to go, trit trot...'

'And after all that,' said Ena, unwilling to pass on to further unlimited detail, 'he goes off and leaves you on your own?'

'Yes, and what am *I* supposed to do?' said Nanny, '—sitting there on a bit of tarpauling with the picnic basket—nothing but a lot of grass and trees, and as for river, well, I don't call that a river and about half a mile away, right down there below us.' Nanny came from the wilds of Essex and had a deep contempt—especially now, having gone to all the grand restrangs with Madam—for any but the urban scene. 'Not even a decent shop, to look in at the windows.'

'Poor Nan! And how long did he leave you there?'

'Oh, well,' admitted Nanny, and it did come a bit flat at the end of all that, 'I can't say it was so very long. I suppose

it just seemed longer. “*You bin a long time*,” I said to him and “*A long time?*” he says, “*Exactly ten minutes*,” he says, cross as two sticks he was: I thought to meself, so she hadn’t waited in for you after all? I thought—’

Ten minutes. So if they’d been up at the top there, it must be one of the houses just across Blackheath—well, just somewhere round there, anyway. ‘It really was ten minutes, Nanny?’

‘Yes, well, about that,’ confessed Nanny. ‘I looked at me watch. And then what d’you think? “I don’t think much of *this place*,” says Ena Mee, well, pore child, I don’t blame her; and, “Oh, don’t you?” he says, calm as a cucumber, after having driven all that way. “Well, let’s do something else,” he says, “let’s go to the zoo, after all, we can have our picnic on a bench there,” he says, “and give what’s left to the monkeys...” All that sweat down to the shops for the Lipter cheese!—and then of course she doesn’t eat two bites of it, much rather feed it to them rangatangs.’

‘So he didn’t see his bird after all?’ said Ena, disappointed.

‘Well, no.’ And what was more, added Nanny, feeling that one might as well get it over with in one go, she might have been wrong after all about his going off to see Her every Saturday evening. He really did seem to have bin to the cinema; last night anyway. She’d played a trick or two on him and he’d never got caught out, not once.

‘Oh, lor’! said Ena, gloomily. She’d seen a blue mink stole and Ronnie wouldn’t divvy up: she’d been counting on a spot more blackmailing of Phin, via Ena Mee.

7

BY SEVEN O'CLOCK, THE police had gone—they had all gone, Etho and Nan, loving and clucking, and Sofa, recovered from hysteria and full of apologies, and Pony, profuse with departing bows of sympathy and regret and Charley; and now the euphoria had long passed away and Sari sat with Rufie on the great, endless couch, arms round one another, knees up to their chins like two sad monkeys huddled together on a branch. ‘Rufie, it is true, it is true, the tree did fall, I did meet the man, I did swap cars with him...’

Checks had been made with the local police and it was a fact that at some time before half-past ten the night before, the great elm had fallen. ‘Dovey-darling, you don’t think—? Well, I mean, yes, we know a tree did fall across the road. Suppose—? Well, if you’d just that second passed, it would have been such a ghastly shock, don’t you think you might have—well, imagined in your mind what would have happened if you’d been just a minute earlier: and then perhaps—?’ His voice trailed away wretchedly. It was never safe to suggest to Sari that something she said might not be true. And then, again, they’d never believed all those stories about her being in danger, and yet here was Vi Feather murdered—and just a couple of hours after Sari had been speaking to her. ‘But why poor old Feather, darling? Why should they—why should anyone—want to kill *her*?’

‘But of course,’ said Sari. ‘I told the policeman. They thought it was me.’

Dread dropped like a plummet in Rufie’s heart. ‘Oh, my God, Sari! But you don’t really believe—?’

‘What else? I’ve kept telling you all. And as you

yourself say—why poor wretched Vi Feather?’

Poor wretched Vi Feather—cramped up in that narrow space, crammed in, crooked arms and legs set at spider angles, claw hands with their horrible outspread appeal. And something... A bleak terror niggled at Rufie’s mind. He said at last, slowly: ‘If people are strangled—surely there’s no blood?’

‘I shouldn’t think so.’ She released her right arm from about his shoulder, sat back away from him, staring him in the face. ‘There was blood—’

‘But was it blood really?’ said Rufie.

‘Not blood?’

His two white hands were thrust up rigidly into the flame of pale hair. ‘Sari—when we found—it, I did something. I touched something. What did I do? What did I touch or pick up or something—?’

‘God knows, darling, *I* wouldn’t know. The whole thing’s sort of blacked out.’ But through the blackness she saw the white face now, in her mind’s eye, the terrible upturned white face and the bent arm tumbling out with the opening of the door, brushing against her leg. And the huddle of pale blue mackintosh; and—the blood... ‘Only it wasn’t blood, you’re right. It wasn’t blood. It was—’

‘It was a rose,’ said Rufie.

Death had been by strangulation. Some time before midnight. And Mr Charlesworth had said nothing about any rose.

‘Sari—that’s what I did. It’s been niggling me ever since, it’s been at the back of my mind. But with the horror of the whole thing... I picked up the rose. That’s what I did. God knows why. A sort of shock reaction, I suppose. It was a rose, a red rose, lying on top of—of her; and I picked it up.’

‘Where is it, then, what did you do with it?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t remember. I just barely remember that for some unknown reason I picked it up. It was beginning to slide—Now I remember,’ said Rufie. ‘It began to slide down—well, slide off her, slide down the shiny mackintosh, I suppose; it must have got jerked when we pulled open the door. And I sort of—caught it.’

‘I don’t remember,’ said Sari. ‘I don’t remember anything. Just... Well, all the rest I don’t remember—only running back across the yard to the flats—and I think I was screaming—?’

Yes, she had been screaming. It had been horrible, those terrible, horrifying, piercing screams. He had run after her, almost hating her. It had added so much to the shock and the horror, that almost ludicrous, engine-whistle screaming as they ran.

He’d run across the yard...

The yard below their window was studded with ugly squared-off flower-beds, cut into the concrete and planted with orderly phalanxes of roses. ‘My hand! Look, darling, these scratches! When that Superintendent said something about—I forgot what, but something about scratching—I remember now in the back of my mind that I glanced down and saw these scratches on my hand and for some reason I didn’t want him to see them and I pulled down my sleeve to cover them. I don’t know why. I didn’t know where I’d got them. But I do know now—when we ran across the yard, I realised I had this thing in my hand and I flung it into one of the rose beds. I don’t know why I did that, either—’

‘Oh, but I understand that. You’d be so sort of—disgusted. I suppose,’ said Sari, ‘we ought to ring up that man and tell him?’

‘You’re not supposed to—interfere with things,

whatever it's called, at "the scene of the crime". Will I get into trouble?"

'I don't know,' said Sari, wearily. She thought it over. 'Oh, Rufie—let's leave it! I really couldn't face any more tonight.'

Rufie got up and went into his room, found paper, dived first and second finger in a pincer movement into ajar, pulled out a mixture and rolled himself an untidy cigarette. 'Darling, *need* you?' said Sari. 'I do so hate the smell.'

'I've got to have a clear head and think.'

'By the same token, Rufie, hadn't you better stash the stuff away somewhere? If we're going to have the fuzz prowling all over the place—?'

'Oh, lord,' said Rufie. 'I suppose I'd better.'

Their spirits rose a little as they entered into earnest discussion of where best to conceal several ounces of hash, growing increasingly hilarious as, with the drug, Rufie's exhilaration rose. He had known a girl who had padded out her bra with it, but Sari was not going to carry the can—well, the pot, ducky, if you'll pardon the pun—for *anyone*. 'Damn it, I don't play the scene myself, I don't see why *I* should be hassled. Pad your own bra with it.'

'Dovey, as gay as you please but a transie, *no*.' He leapt to his feet nevertheless, tore Sofa's huge unfinished kaftan from the sewing machine on the floor, wrapped it twice round himself and minced around with a wobbling pile of crystallised fruit balanced on his head to which, as he moved about, he carefully added more and more. Sari rolled on the couch, exhausted with laughter. 'Oh, darling, you *are* a fool! You're high as a kite!—and now you'll have to wash the sugar out of your hair. And who's going to eat them after this?'

‘They’ll never know,’ said Rufie, recovering glistening plums and apricots from the carpet and slapping them back into shape with the heel of his hand.

‘Give them to Sofy. She won’t mind. It’s a wonder she didn’t scoff them up anyway.’

‘Nothing short of murder would have stopped her,’ said Rufie, removing the kaftan and chucking it back on to the sewing machine. ‘But unfortunately murder did.’

Sari sat up straight and reached for the inevitable cigarette. ‘Oh, it’s dreadful to be laughing!’ The horror of it—the pity of it! It was all so unbelievable; a sort of hideous dream. ‘But, the thing is—what happens next?’

Rufie was sufficiently elevated in spirit to be able to believe, for the moment at any rate, in the exchange of cars. ‘The thing is just to go out and find this man.’

‘A man with a Cadmus Halcyon 3000—and perhaps with a rose,’ said Sari. The vaguest possible niggle came into her mind, a feather towards the collage in which all unwittingly she played so great a part. She suggested: ‘This rose that you think you threw away—’

‘Start by going out and looking for that?’ cried Rufie, enchanted at so promising an adventure. He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her up off the sofa. ‘Have we got a flash somewhere?’

‘Darling—one’s language!’

‘A torch, a torch, you fool!’ said Rufie, rootling about in kitchen drawers. ‘Yes, here’s one. Come on—out!’

They crept out like two giggling schoolchildren, Rufie stepping tremendously high with pointed toe, in the traditional mime of furtivity—to be brought abruptly to a halt as a large shape approached through the darkening evening and a voice enquired civilly: ‘Can I do anything for you, Madam?’

‘Oh, Sari, lucky you!’ said Rufie in a put-on pansy voice.

‘Shut up, Rufie! We were just looking for something,’ she explained and added, somewhat naively since the gentleman was dressed from head to foot in navy blue serge and wearing a pointed helmet, ‘Who would *you* be?’

‘Just keeping a routine eye on things, Madam—Miss,’ he corrected, in recognition of the young voice coming to him out of the dark. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Well—er—this gentleman dropped something here somewhere, and we came out to look for it.’

‘Oh, yes, Miss? Some time today, would that have been?’

‘Well, yes, it was. We’re—well, we’re the ones that found—well, you know. And we ran back to the flats and on the way he must have dropped his—’

‘My car keys,’ said Rufie, inspired.

‘You went out to look at Miss Morne’s car—carrying *your* car keys, sir?’

‘I happened to be on my way to the delicatessent,’ said Rufie loftily. ‘My car was parked next to hers and that’s how we... A hotted-up mini, The Tootler it’s called,’ he added, going off into peals of giggles.

‘Don’t take any notice of him,’ said Sari. ‘He’s been having a few drinks, that’s all.’

‘I understand. In fact I think I can smell on the gentleman’s breath what he’s been having. So these keys, Miss—?’

They went solemnly from flower-bed to flower-bed, considerably assisted by the light from the policeman’s highly superior electric torch, but there was nothing to be found—nothing but one poor, deep red rose, drooping on its cut stem—a curious intruder, perhaps, in a bed of pale pink

Ophelias. But by a coincidence, just as Sari edged out a surreptitious hand to pick it up, Rufie with a glad cry grabbed out with his own hand and goodness!—came up with his car keys after all, complete with a little scrabble of still damp earth. The officer, mystified, was obliged to give them the benefit of the doubt and be content with making a somewhat cynical report to the station and resuming his vigil. Rufie dusted down the keys, returning them to his pocket, and they went back to the flat with their spoils.

Not crushed, not torn in any way, just very squashy and droopy after its long day—never mind how long a night: a deep red rose, dying, on a stem about two inches long.

Detective Chief Superintendent Charlesworth sat at his desk, an orderly scatter of papers spread before him—reports, timetables, maps, forms, lists of names and addresses and a growing crumple of doodles. ‘Come in, Ginger. Just before we crawl off to bed—I want to try to get this thing clear, I want another mind to talk it over with...’

You want another mind to talk it over *at*, thought Sergeant Ellis, and see what it sounds like when you say it all out loud. ‘Some man or other must present a wall,’ he submitted, by no means out loud but just so articulately that Charlesworth could hear him. He sent old Charles mad when he dropped little dabs of quotation.

‘What? What?’ said Charlesworth irritably. But he looked up into the rather pale round face. ‘Sit down. You look flaked out.’

‘And well I might,’ said Ginger, ‘considering the company I’ve been keeping.’ He had been trailing round for hours, checking alibis. He sat down, however, thankfully. The chair was rather too high for his short legs so that he must press his toes to the floor to keep himself steady, and

the linoleum was highly polished and they kept skidding away from under him. He longed, resentfully, for home and a nice hot snack and bed.

‘Yes, well, first to clear things up—you saw the old woman?’

Vi Feather’s mum—a grudging old party, commonly filled with self-pity, to which had now been added an obscurely focused resentment. And who could blame her, poor old bitch? But it had all been wearing; wearing and tedious. Vi’s remoter past, Vi’s last months and weeks and days—Vi’s friends, Vi’s enemies. (‘Not that she’d an enemy in the world, Sergeant, a lovely girl she was, a lovely girl; except you might say that Lily Hopkins at the cinema, jealous she was because Vi got the cleaning there, but that was months ago, well, years ago now; and that conductress on the Intertown, she picked a quarrel with Vi because Vi lost her season ticket; mind, Vi had a bit of a temper when she got flared up...’) And Vi’s finances, Vi’s hopes and ambitions—though these, surely must have been on their last poor, scraggy legs?—Vi’s routine, any breaks in Vi’s routine... ‘To change one’s habits’, said Ginger thoughtfully to Charlesworth, though this time without intention to annoy, ‘has a smell of death.’

‘For heaven’s sake—what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘From the Portuguese, sir, I think; or Spanish.’

‘Never mind the Portuguese—’

‘It was her habit to come back by the Intertown bus. She had a season ticket. And last night she broke the habit.’

‘Oh,’ said Charlesworth, deflated. ‘And she duly died?’

‘Otherwise, sir—nothing. Now and again, she’d bring back a flower, keep it in a little vase, “rather special”. Lately, it’s mostly been a rose, a very dark red rose. Josephine Bruce is the darkest—’

‘All right, we don’t need the horticultural features.’

‘Nossir.’ A bed could be a horticultural feature, thought Ginger bitterly to himself, and I wish I was at home in mine. But he continued doggedly. ‘Doesn’t recall the name Sandra Burnsey, never saw her on the telly because she and Vi never had no telly and what did I think they were, the Aga Khan? Mind you,’ said Ginger, ‘she wasn’t all that unreminiscent of the old one, if you remember him?’

‘I’ve seen pictures of a stout, dark-avised elderly gent in tails and a topper, at the Ascot races.’

‘Well, she had no tails and no topper,’ said Ginger. ‘I wouldn’t know about Ascot.’

Since Sari’s single idea was that Vi Feather had been murdered in mistake for herself, it had seemed necessary to investigate the movements of her immediate circle. ‘Burnsey says she was at home all evening,’ said Charlesworth consulting a list, ‘swotting up a part for a television play—’

‘Through the Fields in Gloves,’ said Ginger, whipping up his flagging spirits into an eager-beaver attitude, bent a little forward, paws folded, knuckles together at his breast. ‘Frances Cornford.’

‘What are you yatting about now?’

‘The poem, sir. “O fat white woman whom nobody loves, Why do you walk through the fields in gloves Missing so much and so much?” About a wife out in Rhodesia who moves around among the natives and never speaks a word to them so that she never gets to know them. So when the time comes—’

‘OK, spare me the plot. Burnsey’s alibi is that she was at home swotting up her lines.’

‘Well, but that’s just it, sir, isn’t it?’ said Ginger, sweetly. ‘The woman in the film never speaks a word. So no lines.’

'Oh. Well. I suppose they can just read the play and get to know what it's about and so forth. At any rate—no witnesses. But also, no apparent connection with the crime either.'

'Except that she knew both Morne and the departed Feather in the old days at the studio. And so did that Rupert Soames and so did Ethelbert Wendover—'

'What names these people contrive to get for themselves! But anyway, those two cancel each other out, alibi-wise.'

'M'mmmm,' said Ginger.

'An element of m'mm, I agree. The widow Winter spent the evening at a friend's flat, complete with friend—'

'M'mmmm?' said Ginger on a different note.

'No m'mm of that sort; a respectable clergyman who apparently duly checks. The Indian boy, Charley Something —?'

'Flogging up his studies in the medical library. The attendants won't account for him, they say three-quarters of the students there were coloured, which to them means indistinguishable from one another.'

'They do put their hearts into it, these black chaps, don't they?' said Charlesworth. 'You've got to respect them.'

'Yessir,' said the sergeant, who respected them anyway.

'The Italian—?'

Pony had been spending the evening in a club with two little romps all fluttering eyelashes and tangled curls, so jangling with chains and bracelets that you could hardly hear what they said. 'Not that it would matter,' said Ginger gloomily, 'you couldn't believe a word either way.'

'Yes, well...' Charlesworth brooded over his enchantress and her circle of chums. 'They're a queer lot.'

'You can say that again,' said Ginger, going a bit pink.

Bobsie and Ronsie had pronounced his red hair to be adorable. ‘All the same, it’s a tight alibi. Everyone in the place swears he was there; there was some sort of stage appearance he was taking part in.’

Charlesworth passed a thumbnail down a list, much marked with ticks and crosses. ‘So that’s about the lot. There must be others in her circle, but they seem to be more outlying. So we come to the sixty million dollar one. Miss Sari Morne—did she or did she not change cars with a stranger, across the fallen tree?’ Charlesworth pretended not to notice his sergeant’s not very surreptitious glance at his watch. ‘Play it first that she didn’t—?’

The tree falls but she has already gone by. With or without the burden of Vi Feather’s body, she drives home, parks her car, and that’s that.

‘The time element shows that she couldn’t have spent much extra time on the way: not after leaving the pub. Not gone out of her way to get the woman, for example.’

‘We have only her flatmate’s word for the time she got home, though.’

Nothing had been discovered as to Vi’s movements after the cinema closed; on such a night, everyone was heads down, umbrellas up, battling against wind and rain. Only one thing was certain, she had not taken her usual Intertown bus. ‘Sari Morne knew the woman. Might she have given her a lift?’

‘We know she wasn’t in the car, sir, when Miss Morne left the pub. The man looked into the car.’

‘In the boot? Already dead and in the boot of the car?’

‘What, killed between the cinema and the pub?’ Ginger gave one of his vaguely Gallic shrugs. ‘There’s no evidence of anything having been in the boot, sir, ever; the car’s brand new. And anyway, why not have *left* her in the boot?’

—not hauled her out some time or other, and put her in the back of the car.’ On the other hand, the consensus of opinion was that the body had been placed there after death.

‘For that matter, why not just have tipped her out on the side of the road?’

‘The whole thing is quite, quite *mad*,’ said Ginger. His hands flapped apart. Beyond bothering about, they seemed to say; let’s get back to our homes and have slices of dripping toast and hot milk and skip the whole bloody business...

‘Between the cinema and her flat,’ said Charlesworth, remorselessly, ‘she strangles the woman, drives her home, leaves the body in the back of her car and goes off to bed. The fall of the tree is fortuitous. But how did she even know about it? You’re too right, the entire thing’s sheer madness.’

‘If the tree fell just after she’d passed, she’d know. And that would give her the idea—to claim to have changed cars with some unknown man, and he must have returned hers with the body in it.’

‘How could he? By the time that tree would have fallen.’

‘Side roads?’ said Ginger with one of his neat gestures towards the plan laid out on the desk. ‘Some other way round? There’d be no hurry then.’

‘Yeah, well... The same thing would apply,’ said Charlesworth thoughtfully, ‘if her story was true after all. If she really had swapped cars. She could have gone out again after her chum was asleep and driven back to Wren’s Hill—she doesn’t admit the man gave her his address, just a ‘phone number; but he may have done—and left his car and collected her own.’

‘Only—why? If she knew about the body, it was all to

her advantage to have it found in the stranger's car—'

'And if she didn't, why go to the trouble of swapping back?'

'Here we go round the mulberry bush,' said Ginger; a path, he thought, which by no means leads me home to bed.

But Charlesworth was not risking a disquisition upon the life cycle of the silk worm. 'The whole damn thing's a great rigmarole of nonsense, look at it whichever way you will. I just wanted to hear someone else say so.' He got up from his chair, with an enormous yawn. 'Go on, hop it! You look absolutely all in!' (*Ap-solutely*, his goddess would have said, giving it a faintly mocking, indulgent air. An extraordinary crowd; you simply couldn't keep up with them.)

Ginger lowered himself, with relief, from his aching toes to the soles of his feet and stood, the earnest neophyte, still all brave and willing but dismissed by edict of compassionate God; inwardly, however, addressing Charlesworth with hideous imprecations for keeping a chap up, playing bloody silly games, when he was already half dead with weariness and ennui. 'It's been good of you to stay with it,' said Charlesworth kindly, taken in by the look. 'Great help talking it over. Cleared the air. Thank you.'

'Thank you sir,' said Ginger. Silly old bugger! he thought to himself. For, after all, it hadn't cleared the air at all.

8

SARI WOKE UP WITH the customary moaning and groaning, ill, depressed and, in recollection, terribly frightened. Rufie was standing by her bed with coffee and cigarettes all ready. 'I've had a ghastly morning, darling, fighting off the press, I've had to leave the 'phone off the hook, but they're simply swarming all over the place.' In fact, two or three journalists had finally wangled their way through the police guard around the flats. He said rather hopefully: 'You'll have to stay in all day; you daren't go out.'

'But we've got to go and find the man,' said Sari, heavy-eyed, gulping black coffee as though it were the elixir of life.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. Sari's bed was enormous, with a coverlet depicting a curious jungle scene painted by herself, except that she had never got around to putting in the green bits—which, after all, were much the most plentiful, and therefore very dull to do; so that blue tigers and purple elephants inhabited an unlikely winter landscape of bare tree trunks. 'Sari, we went a bit dotty last night, I was high as a kite, I admit it; but, let's face it—it's your car.'

'He must have turned round as soon as the tree was cut away, and swapped back.'

'The tree wasn't out of the way till quite late this morning.'

'Well, there's lots of side roads, I expect. He'd know them, he knew the district, he told me a place where I could reverse, which he'd never have noticed that night in all that storm.'

‘Then why didn’t he take one of the side roads to get home?’

Sari held her aching head. ‘Oh, Rufie—spare me! It would just be a longer way round, I suppose, and he was in a hurry.’

‘So he hurried to wherever it was in your car, and then turned round and brought it straight back?’ He said, but he knew the answer before he spoke: ‘What about the car keys?’

‘I left them hanging in the ignition, I suppose,’ said Sari. ‘I was so terrified of those people following me, I just leapt out of the car the minute I got here and rushed into the hall. And anyway, you know I always forget.’

‘You really are nutty, darling,’ said Rufie, who usually forgot himself: in fact it was part of the game—the affectation?—of easy-going, careless living, among the whole gang of them, not to think of these things. The purest good fortune that he’d happened to have his own in his pocket, when the policeman came upon them last night hunting for the rose.

‘In all that storm and stuff, who would have seen him?’ said Sari, pursuing her theme. ‘No one would be out in such weather if they could help it; and from the flats, you can’t see in under the shed.’

Even beneath the narrow peaked roof of the so-called sheds, the heavy rain had been blown in by the high winds, muddy puddles had formed and been swept across the concrete floors. Little sign remained of the comings and goings of cars or of their owners and by the time the police had arrived upon the scene, there had been a good deal of the normal Sunday morning activity of other tenants. Such signs as had been identified served only to confirm the acknowledged actions of the night before. ‘Still, he’d be

taking a chance.'

'Rufie, there was this huge storm blowing, you know what the shed was like last night, you were there yourself coming back from Etho's: dark as pitch and a howling gale blowing through. A man drives in, in a plain black car and gets out of it and then after a minute he gets into what looks exactly the same car and drives off again. He's forgotten something or come back to get something or—who cares? Only, he hadn't so much come back to get something as to leave something. And what he left was - what he'd brought. He'd brought a dead body in the back of my car.'

'Why *leave* it there, Sari? In all that storm, he could just have pitched it out by the roadside.'

Nicotine and black coffee were bringing Sari back to the surface. She stopped clutching her head and ran her fingers through her thatch of hair so that it stood up softly on the end and all a-glow. 'Wherever he left it, there might be some connection found with him - he might have to account for it. This way—I do.' And she kicked aside the leafless jungle and, staggering slightly with the awfulness of it being only half-past ten in the morning, heaved herself out of bed. 'You promised! Come on, we've got to find him.'

But Rufie, though last night he had been full of plans and promises, by this morning had changed his mind. Mr Cecil of Christophe's had rung up and was ap-solutely blackmailing him, dovey, for these wretched sketches and he simply must work, honestly he must. Mad keen to come on the hunt, but, dovey-darling, truly, truly....

'Oh, well, never mind, I'll try and get Charley, then.'

Charley's car was a livid green sports model—it was like driving about, Sari used to say, in a glass gravy-boat filled

with pea soup; but it did as well as any other, and the journalists thronged about the fiat up on the heights of Hampstead had taken little notice of a coloured gentleman and his bespectacled girlfriend driving off in a pea-green sports car. Sari had been clever with a mud-coloured make-up and Rufie had contrived to dig up for her a long-haired blonde wig. ('Oh, darling, *not* one of the Visitors?' But no, no, Rufie had resentfully replied, how often did one have to tell her, one ap-solutely did not go in for Camp; if she wanted to know, he'd been matching up material with the wig to be worn by the model of one of his creations.) 'Marvellous, Charley, we've dodged the lot!' They made a great pretence of gooping about like sensation-seekers, driving very slowly past the scene of yesterday's ghastly discovery, Sari even leaning out to call to one or two of the reporters, 'Anything new?' From now on, the slightly dreary blonde, with or without Paki boyfriend, would go unnoticed in and out of the flats. 'So now, darling, to the garage first and I'll scream out to them to look around for a new car for me. The minute the police release the Halcyon, I'll get rid of it. I couldn't bear to set eyes on it, ever again.'

So they stopped briefly at the garage and, minus the wig, she called out her message, promising to explain later. The garage who had read in the morning papers all about how the dead body of a woman had been found in the boot of Miss Sari Morne's car—a fact apparently confided to this one reporter alone by the head of the Metropolitan Police himself—cried respectfully back that they quite understood. To Charley's timid protestations that she would lose a great deal of money on a brand new car, she replied that she'd have to get something cheaper, that was all, unless her beastly trustees would see reason and divvy up; just as long as it had a decent bit of acceleration—more than ever, now,

must Sari have a car with speed...

And they stopped at a chemist's and she rushed in and emerged with a large packet of cotton-wool. What Sari could do with all the cotton-wool she bought, the Eight Best never could imagine, she was for ever dropping off at chemists' and buying packages of it. 'Well, I clean my face with it, don't I?' And she liked the kind that was made up in little separate blobs—for babies's bottoms, actually, Sari supposed, but it did get used up much more quickly. 'So now a quick wee, darling, at the public loo, there's a lovely one just round the corner there, I know it well—and then off to go!' The quick wee was on the whole quicker than usual considering that she'd had to take off all the reporter-off-putting make-up. 'So now we really can get weaving. Wren's Hill!'

Charley obediently headed the green gravy-boat towards the road she had travelled two nights ago. 'What we want is to find a man—a rather tall man, I did notice that much—who has a Cadmus Halcyon and—well, access, at any rate, to red roses; or who, anyway, had a red rose that night.' She and Rufie had looked over the roses in the beds outside the flats and there were none so red as the one that had lain on Vi Feather's humped dead shoulder. 'Oh, but you don't know about that, Charley, do you? And perhaps I'd better not tell you; it's kind of Rufie's secret. Forget about the rose.'

But how could the rose have got there? How could it have got there? Like—well, sort of like putting flowers on a grave, she thought to herself. Had someone laid a red rose upon Vi Feather's dead body, by way of farewell? She said, suddenly: 'Charley! That car's following us.'

'Some car iss following us?' said Charley in his sing-song way. One went to school and talked like the other kids

there, but then one went home. His mixture of Scouse and Pakistani was part of Charley's charm for his friends, and he retained the family habit of launching himself upon a long word or series of words run together.

'That small black car behind us. Slow down! Come on, slow down! Now, look in the driving mirror—it's slowing down too. Now accelerate—there you are, you see, they're speeding up. I tell you, I know all the tricks. It's following us.' She reached out automatically for cigarettes and he saw that her hands were actually shaking. 'When you come to the next turning, go left—never mind where it leads to, go left—then slow down; don't stop, it's too frightening in case they're... But slow down. If they seem to do anything—then just step on the gas.' She fumbled desperately, tearing at the packet of cigarettes. 'Now! Turn here!'

And sure enough the black car turned also and, finding them slowed down almost to walking pace, had nothing for it but to drive on past them. 'You wait! When we come round this bend, we'll find them dawdling, waiting for us.'

For a moment, it had been genuinely frightening. Now Charley said: 'But, Sari darling, thiss iss only a *polisscar*.'

'The police? What doing?'

'Well, you are suspect, Sari, it must be, mustn't it?'

'You're joking!' said Sari.

'But, darling, after all—'

'Who would seriously think I could kill poor wretched Vi Feather?'

'She iss being found dead in your car, Sari, after all.'

'The police have lights on top of their cars,' said Sari, suspicious again.

'Not always. Not advertising themselves.'

'Oh, well, if it's really the police, let them follow,' said Sari. 'It'll keep us safe from—the others. Just turn round

and carry on. *I don't care if they know what we're doing.'*

'What exactly *are* we doing?' said poor Charley.

'Looking for a man and a car—and a rose,' said Sari, impatiently. She remembered. 'That chap at the pub—he told me that several people in Wren's Hill had Halcyons.'

So they made for the pub. It was once again a clear and sunny day and with their nice safe police escort, rather pleasant to be driving down the country roads. They passed the fallen elm, now sawn into three with the great centre trunk rolled to one side. 'My God, what a crash it must have been making—coming down right there in your front.' Charley, more guileless than the rest, never doubted the story of the man at the tree.

'If I'd been just a few minutes earlier—!'

They were glad to reach the pub: what with the garage and the cotton-wool and the quick wee, they'd been getting a bit anxious about closing time—and were mildly amused to find themselves followed in by two of the most obvious plain clothes policemen, said Sari, that ever wore size twelve boots—who drank beer unobtrusively in a far corner. She left an order for tomato juice and went off for the inevitable wee, returning to the tomato juice with new eyebrows, lids an exquisite muted sunset and a great lashing-on of a very pale pink lipstick. 'There's a most peculiar lady in your loo,' she confided to the man behind the bar. 'I never saw anyone with so much hair all over them. Absolutely sprouting through her stockings like mustard and cress on a bit of flannel.'

The landlord looked anxiously into the faces of his patrons to see whether anyone had caught—and might mildly resent—this reference to a nearest and dearest; but their eyes were riveted on Sari's own hair. He had had a splendid day retailing the events of last Sat'day night and

the subsequent police enquiries, and no one present could fail to recognise his vivid descriptions of the lady's coiffure. He drew the new arrivals down to one end of the counter, and all ears were strained to listen—including, to Sari's delight, those of the owners of the Size Twelve Boots. But the man could tell them nothing, really. He had perhaps exaggerated a bit, he admitted—one said these things carelessly and his boast of several new Cadmus 3000's running around in Wren's Hill amounted really to his having seen one, a day or two before, filling up at the garridge...

'The garage will know who owned it,' said Sari, exultant on tomato juice, and dragged Charley away from his Vodka-and-Coca-Cola and the Number Twelves from their beer, and dashed off out to the little green sports car.

Charley's keys which, as usual, he had left dangling from the dashboard, were gone.

Of the lady with the superfluous hair, there was nothing to be seen. Nor had the landlord observed anyone of the sort in his bar. There was an outside entrance from the car park to the lavatories.

The Number Twelves looked upon one another with a wild surmise; though there was not much to surmise about, as regarded what Mr Charlesworth would say to him when he learned that they had not thought of splitting up, one to watch the suspects, the other to stay outside. 'Well, meantime, you stay with this lot, Bill, and I'll go out to the car.' Bill issued instructions made somewhat sharper than need be by his own inner quakings, and Dawkins, the landlord, with apparently mounting exasperation, shouted

‘Time, gentlemen, *please!*’ though it was still several minutes too early; and ushered Sari and Charley, both somewhat shaken, into the Snug. ‘As it happens, there’s a doctor here; the wife’s threatening any minute though it never seems to happen. As soon as he comes down, I’ll get him to see to the lady.’ Real shocked she looked, poor girl; like she’d looked when, two nights ago, she’d told him that a car had been following her. He’d doubted it a bit then, but with all that was happening now, well there must have been some truth in it. A small glow burned within him at the thought of all the excitement and profit this would bring to the Fox. His pub was called The Fox in His Den.

A Size Twelve stood by with his notebook. ‘You’re absolutely sure, sir, that you left your keys?’ It was unimaginable to a policeman that any man could be so stupid, but still—these Paks! ‘You’ve searched your pockets, sir?’

‘Try not to be silly,’ said Sari.

‘Didn’t put them down on the bar?’

‘No, no, neversuchathing,’ said Charley. They were all so gay and feckless in the group, they all lived so carelessly and easily—Charley did his very best to keep up with them, and one of the most lovely, casual things of all was just to drop your car wherever you happened to be, irrespective of parking rules, and leave it there, keys and all. No one else ever seemed to have any trouble but poor Charley was always getting into muddles and having to be helped out by the rest. And now... ‘I have virryvirry bad habit, Officer, of leaving keys in car. Isn’t it, Sari?’ But Sari seemed actually to have passed into a state of shock, dead white and shivering, clinging to his arm. ‘Oh, Charley, I’m frightened! Behind the police—even behind the *police* they must have been after us...’

‘—a spare, sir?’

But his spare key had been lost in the last adventure and he had never got around to arranging for a new one. What with medical school and the studies into which Charley put all his earnest heart, and dancing attendance upon his beloved Eight Best, he had little time to spare for other details of life. ‘I am virry virry sorry, Officer, I am making a greatgreat deal of trouble.’

‘Well, we’ll have to do what we can. Now, Miss, as to this woman—’

‘Oh, leave me alone!’ said Sari, clinging and shivering. ‘I’ve *told* you. A great butch woman, all covered with hair.’ A man? Well, she supposed it could have been a man, only it hadn’t been that sort of man-y hair. But—! ‘Oh, Charley, if it was a man! If they’re disguising themselves now—’

‘Not worrying, darling, now the pollis are being with us, you are safe.’

‘The person didn’t speak to you, Miss?’

‘Speak to me? Oh, Christ!’ said Sari, bursting out with it suddenly, ‘Don’t go on and on about it!—don’t you see that she was watching me, sizing me up, planning against me, right there in the room with me...’ And she screamed out again to leave her alone, leave her alone, leave her *alone*...

‘Yes, Officer, just leave her for the moment,’ said a quiet voice; and a man stood in the doorway, a tall man, holding a medical bag in his right hand, the shoulder sloping a little with the weight of it. She looked up sharply—shot to her feet—took one tottering step forward and, for the second time, fell into his arms.

The man who had been at the cinema—was it only two nights ago?—who had said, ‘I enjoyed every minute of it,’ smiling down at her, restoring her gently to her balance, seeming almost reluctant at having to let her go. ‘Oh,’ she

cried out, and all her heart lifted up towards him, ‘it’s you! It’s *jou!*’

This time he did not immediately put her back on her feet: just stood there holding her, dropping the heavy bag on to the seat beside him, putting his free arm around her to hold her safe and steady, comforting her. ‘Stay quiet,’ he said. ‘You’re all right. You’re safe.’

But the beating of their close hearts told them both, perhaps, that they were not quite so safe after all.

The police had been dealt with, the hirsute lady in the loo described all over again, Charley hauled off to confirm yet once more that he had, he *had*, left the keys in the dashboard, that they really had been stolen and the car immobilised; and had been driven off to the garage in search of duplicates. The doctor had rather commandingly said that Miss Morne had better come back with him till she was ready to return to London and had tucked her into a large, ageing Rover which waited outside the pub, and driven her through Wren’s Hill, past the now immortal cinema and up the steep road to his house, perched on the summit. Nanny, who would have recognised Miss Sari Morne in one minute flat and known all the latest sensational news centring upon her name, had had her second bad night running, what with her toothache, and was taking an afternoon kip, Ena Mee being left in the care of an ancient charlady who knew nothing about film stars and only wondered vaguely, staring up at her, purblind, what the poor young lady had done to the top of her head. Tea and toast were prescribed and Sari shown upstairs for one of the famous wees, from which she returned feeling a new woman and indeed looking it. Phin was waiting for her in the hall. ‘Oughtn’t you to be whizzing round among your

patients?’

‘No, I’ve been at it since half-past seven this morning when my first began her labour pains, and I think I’m entitled to a rest. I’ve rung the hospital; there’s nothing that can’t be coped with. Come through to the sitting room.’

It was the sort of room the Eight Best Friends simply hated. ‘Bad Habitat’ Rufie would have called it. A couple of graceful bits of Regency, certainly, but all the rest totally out of tune and all so thought-out and self-conscious. Masses of pseudo-Chinese curtains covered with little people and pagodas and camels and things—no they couldn’t be Chinese, thought Sari, one didn’t have camels in China (or did one?—all that opium and stuff getting carried about)—well, Persian then, and even the bloody lampshade the right sort of lantern shape to fit in with wherever it was... In the midst of it all, a rather stout small girl stood regarding her without love and asked at last, as she sank into a pale brown, blown-up chair that seemed to go down and down for ever like a mushroom gone mad, ‘Why have you got orange moss on your head?’

‘I ate too much samphire in my youth,’ said Sari promptly.

This explanation was apparently acceptable. Ena Meena however continued cagily: ‘Do you live in Grenwidge?’

‘No,’ said Sari. She was fond of the kiddywinx in the ordinary way but now all she wanted was to be alone with Phin Devigne and tell him... Tell him... She said somewhat balefully, ‘Why should I?’

‘Nanny rang up Mummy and said she thought you did. I could hear, from the landing.’

‘Oh *did* she?’ said Phin, thoughtfully. He looked, Sari thought, decidedly uncomfortable. ‘Well, you see now that she doesn’t.’

He lived here—but evidently if Nanny wanted to speak to Mummy she had to ring up. Please God, please God, prayed Sari, make him be separated, make him be—available! Phin said carefully: ‘Her mother and I are divorced,’ and to the child, ‘There’s no one who lives in Greenwich, Ena Mee. We went for our picnic to Greenwich Park—just because it was nice there.’

‘But it wasn’t,’ said Ena Mee.

‘Well, I thought it was going to be. I don’t know anyone living there.’

‘Well, then, who did you give the message to?’ said Ena Mee. ‘You said it was a case.’

‘Oh, good heavens, you and Nanny are like a pair of Private Eyes. In fact it was a patient and he hadn’t waited in after all as I told you.’

‘You mean *she* hadn’t waited in.’

‘There ain’t no flies on the Lamb of God,’ said Sari. As usual after moments of stress, a heady exhilaration was beginning to build up in her. She asked: ‘Would Miss Edge of Sheffield happen to be fluent in French?’

‘Is she talking about me?’ said Ena Mee, acutely.

Phin explained pacifically. ‘The lady’s only asking if you can talk French.’

‘No, of course I can’t,’ said Ena Mee crossly. ‘Why does she want to know?’

‘Because she has something she wants to tell your father,’ said Sari. ‘I suppose’, she said to Phin in her own perfectly accented French, ‘that we couldn’t just for a moment be free of this articulate dumpling of yours? She could run and have a further chat with Nanny about the lady who receives messages in Gren-widge of a Sunday morning.’

‘Yes, well... Ena Mee, darling, this lady is a patient and

she has to talk to me. So trot along like a good girl and you and Daddy will have a lovely time together this evening.'

'If she's a patient, you can't have an affair with her,' said Ena Mee, all too evidently quoting. 'The G.C.M. will be after you if you do.'

'The G.M.C.,' said Phin, automatically, 'Now, Ena Mee, that's enough. Run along, please.'

'Sorry, love,' said Sari, cursing herself for having alienated the child. 'I hope we'll meet again soon.'

'Well, *I* hope we *don't*,' said Ena Mee, departing with a flounce.

'Oh, dear—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset her.'

'I don't think children ever like being—well, mocked at.'

'I know, and I'm truly sorry; it was stupid. But I'm still a bit fraught. I always get this sort of reaction, I kind of do my nut for a bit and things come out before I mean to say them.'

'You've had a bad shock,' he said soberly, though he did not yet understand what the shock had been. It was true that he had been working since early morning. A swift glance through *The Times* had told him only briefly of the body found in the car; the press had not yet got going, no news had trickled through to him of recent events in the life of Famed Film Star, Sari Morne. She had said in the car simply that someone seemed to have followed her and her friend down from London, for the sole purpose of pinching their car keys...

'Why take just the keys? After all, they're not much use without the car.'

'No, but similarly, the car's not much use without the keys,' she had said darkly. She had seemed badly upset by it, in a state of shock, and now, having dismissed the child,

presumably wanted to talk about it. He prompted: 'You wanted to tell me something?'

She wanted to tell him that she was in love, had known it ever since that moment in the cinema—even through all the terror and horror of subsequent events, had never quite lost the little warm spark of it, that in that moment had been lighted in her empty heart: she wanted to tell him that she loved him. But now—stupid, stupid to have gone and teased the poor little kid! It had got on her nerves, that was all—so bossy and belligerent, with her Nanny-isms and all that yat about Greenwich. She had lost her head and now the precious moment was spoilt and gone. He was saying again, gently: 'Something to tell me—?' and she found herself answering, glancing coldly about her, 'Only that I do think this is an awful room. That lady didn't have much taste, did she?'

'The lady has gone,' he said briefly, hardly seeming to attend.

'Well, I'd sort of worked that out,' said Sari. She added: 'And I was glad.'

He looked at her sharply. He said: 'I know you'll think I'm mad, blurting it out like this—but I've fallen in love with you.'

'Oh, darling!' said Sari, joyfully. 'Me too.'

Charley, ringing up about the return home, accepted without rancour her explanation that she was leaving him flat; that Mr Devigne would put everything right with the police and then, if it got too late, would give her some dinner and drive her back. The Eight never questioned one another's decisions, which were inclined to be arbitrary in the extreme. 'All right, darling, I ring up and tell Rufie; better anyway with all newspaper men everywhere, if you

are getting back in the dark.'

So Ena Mee was destined after all not to have a lovely evening with Daddy. 'We'd better clear out of here,' said Phin. 'Nanny will be appearing and the damn woman watches me like a hawk. She wants to take Ena Mee and go and live with my ex. and she's always trying to catch me out in some sort of misdemeanour.'

'Isn't it right that a child should live with its mother?'

'I couldn't let Ena Mee go,' said Phin. 'My wife... Well, she can't help it, she's psychopathic, that's all; but they're terrible people for children to depend upon.'

'What makes a psychopath?'

'Well, they have—no love. They turn only inwards. They just don't relate to other people, they look through a glass darkly and see their own reflections and nothing more.'

'That's not very nice for them either?'

'No, it isn't. They're lonely people, terribly alone; all by themselves with their mirror-images. I think they're always trying to be like other people, to feel things like other people do, to care for other people, and they're bewildered and sometimes frightened because they can't. That's Ena, my wife. She can't help it, she just can't feel anything about anybody, or feel anything towards anybody—except herself.'

'But you loved her once?' said Sari.

'Lots of people love Ena—for a little while.' He helped her into her coat and they went out to the car. 'We'll do something very shocking. We'll go to my consulting rooms. I don't use them on Monday afternoons; no secretaries or anyone there.'

'Goodness,' said Sari with blissful simplicity. 'I've never made love before, on a consulting room couch.'

If this was not entirely true of Phineas Devigne, he failed to break out into any welter of confession. Not that Sari would have complained. The past was the past.

The past was the past; but today was today and in his arms the lonely, ever-seeking heart found peace and security at last and—surely—for ever. The shifting circle of the Eight Best Friends had supported her for so long—so fond, so close-knit, and yet a thing of fantasy, after all, a ring of bean-shoots growing in a saucer of water that had no deep roots striking down into solid ground. Its essential had been, perhaps, that its members were people alone—let anyone forge close ties elsewhere, and unconsciously, he drifted away from the group, unconsciously was allowed to go, was edged out. That the ring had centred upon Sari had been more or less fortuitous: her flat was large and uninhibited by difficult neighbours, she had often more money and always more leisure than the rest, and of late, together with Rufie, had offered a more positive core than the others, each on his own, might do. But now...

But now she was close, close in his arms; and safe in his love, poured out to him all her heart. Things she had never told anyone, she told him now. The aeroplane crash, the falling, falling; the crying out for her mother and father; the brave hands snatching her back from the flames, the hateful aunt, cold and unsympathetic; the years of enslavement on a pilgrimage about Europe in the restless search for health. ‘She was madly neurotic, one awful hydro after another with me stuck in boarding schools—and foreign boarding schools, mind you!—for a few weeks or a few months and then dragged away and off to another one, while she gagged down more waters or wallowed in more mud. And of course in the end, poor thing, it killed her!’ And the funeral and the

meeting with Solon and the film ê

‘You were so marvellous! I remember it so well, though it’s...’ He broke off and said a bit hurriedly, ‘Well, of course, you know. That’s where we—’

‘Caught fire,’ said Sari, and indeed all her heart was aflame.

Evening had come. He telephoned home and spoke first to Ena Mee and then to Nanny. ‘I’ve explained to Ena Mee, Nanny—I’ve got this difficult case and I think it may take a long time. Ena Mee understands.’ Nanny, having heard from Ena Mee all about the orange-moss lady, also understood perfectly. ‘So something special for supper and I’ll give her a treat tomorrow, promise, promise, to make up.’ There was a lovely little, rather chichi pub that Sari had passed between Wren’s Hill and London, called the Heavenly Angel, but he seemed oddly resistant to the idea of going there and they went to some other place he’d heard of. She didn’t care, she’d have gone to supper with him in *hell*... Only more of a sort of grill room there, she supposed. ‘Devilled bones—’

‘Soul Lucifer—’

‘*Crime Brûlée*—’

‘Open up a bottle of the Graves, Alphonse!’

‘Or you could always take the table d’hôte—’

But it was a dull place, really; a rather ordinary little place, only splashed with the golden joy of his presence there with her. Of his own past, he said very little: what was there to tell? The clever young man with a great potential, falling too soon for the wiles of a siren, accepting something less than a little patience might have promised him: not waiting for a consultancy in one of the great teaching hospitals, settling for less distinction and earlier profit, so as to establish a home for importunate Ena, to be filled with

Bad Habitat. Long after disillusionment had set in, he had, to provide himself with a life-line to cling to, blackmailed her into reluctant production of Ena Mee; whereafter she had pursued her conduct of endless affairs, all abruptly concluded by the gentlemen, to her continuing astonishment—until at last Ronald had appeared on the scene and the final divorce. ‘And you?’

‘Well, there was Aldo.’ And she told him about Aldo, son of the magnificent Grand Duke Lorenzo, of San Juan el Pirata, and his heir. ‘I suppose it all went to my head. We were both only kids. But I think now... I think that Aldo was one of those people you were talking about—like your Ena. It was just like you said—one could love him very much—for a little while. And very soon, he didn’t love *me* at all. But meanwhile, we’d gone off secretly and got married.’ And because it was Phin, because it was ‘for ever’—she forced herself to talk about the ring.

The great diamond betrothal ring of the Grand Ducal family of San Juan el Pirata. ‘Probably loot left over from the original old pirate who seized the island; but anyway, ap-solutely priceless. And they’re still pretty feudal over there, they seem to think that without this wretched ring, a marriage is more or less illegal.’ There were extra jewels that slotted into the original as the marriage got weaving, ‘Rubies for the espousal, a good woman is above and all that, and then a vast great emerald for the first boy and a ditto sapphire for the first girl and then minor emeralds and sapphires all down along the line—what the thing must have looked like by the time they had a large family,’ said Sari, ‘I simply can’t imagine. But the first bits were pretty terrific.’

‘He did give it to you then?’

‘Well—he got hold of it. He went home to get

permission to marry me: he must have been mad because nowadays despite the piratical background, they're too twin-set-and-pearls for *words*—he'd just escaped from Eton or Winchester or some- where and was supposed to be nose-to-grindstone, finishing his education in Rome; but of course he wasn't even bending over, he met a girl who was working on the picture, she's a great, great chum of mine these days—you'll meet her; terrifically fat, she is, but in those days quite the sylph, and, anyway, she brought him to the studio and that's where he met me. But of course they were hardly about to let him marry some little film starlet, and he's petrified of his father; he never got around to asking. He just quietly abstracted the ring from his mother's trinket box which seems to be about the size of the average house, and skipped off back to me in Rome. I didn't realise it then,' said Sari, 'but I think it was then that they began to follow me.'

'His parents?'

'I think they put their Mafia on to us. The Red Mafia, it's called, even in Italy. I think they've been dogging me ever since.'

'That's why—this business of the car keys this afternoon—?'

'Yes, well, after poor Vi—' But a waiter interrupted then, putting dishes on the table and, already regretting marring their happiness by so horrific a subject, she returned to the earlier subject. 'So then, complete with ring, we were married, and I must say, I did play the studio up; and to be fair, I really thought that once the film was finished, it was finished. But then in about five minutes flat, I'd found Aldo out—and what you said today does so much explain it—and he just went off back to San Juan and left me on my poor little tod. But the company had had it, and I

never made a picture again—just my one poor little film.'

'You were wonderful. Look how you're still remembered!'

'Well, I think that's what Etho feels. I'm sure he'd like to get me back working, but they still refuse to take me. And I'm under contract; I can't work anywhere else.'

'Etho—?'

'Oh, you'll meet him too; he's the first, the best—founder member, really, of the Eight Best Friends, him and Sofy. I think he was told to get me back to England and set me on my feet again; they didn't want a lot of talk, I suppose, and then people realising what a lot of stand-in work had been done on the picture. Like that poor Carole Lombard after she died—back views, huge hats and all that.'

'And Aldo?'

'Cleared out, and then a secret letter, saying they hadn't discovered the loss of the ring and to send it back to him. He seemed to think a registered envelope would do nicely but I didn't happen to have one by me at the time and I just didn't answer. So nothing happened until this engagement and they must have discovered it was missing, and they sussed out my solicitor but I just told him to tell them I hadn't got it and I had no idea where it was, Aldo was the last to have had it...'

'You don't even know where it is?'

For the first time ever, she confessed it. 'Well—I might. But I couldn't tell anyone; and certainly I could never get it back—God knows, I'd give it to them if I could.'

'Yet you're so frightened of these people?'

'I'm helpless,' said Sari. 'I couldn't get it back. And that's the end of it.'

'And of Aldo? There *has* been a divorce?' said Phin, rather anxiously.

'Oh, yes, or an annulment. I suppose', said Sari, as Mr Charlesworth had earlier suggested to Etho, 'they just bought the Pope a new cathedral or something. In fact they must have, because they're marrying Aldo off to this Italian girl. Which, like I say—is why they now really must have the ring. So you do see!'

He still did not see very much; but he wanted the dinner to end, he wanted to leave the restaurant and the other people there, to be alone with her again. They went out to his car and he drove her home and came up to the flat with her and was with her there till the early hours. But in all that time, they spoke of nothing but their love.

Nothing about murder. Nothing about police investigations. Nothing about the storm and the fall of the tree...

Nothing about that dreadful thing that had lain with stiffened angled arms and legs, with the deep red rose slowly, slowly, sliding down from the hunched shoulder beneath the pale blue, shiny plastic mackintosh...

She had known very little of happiness in her difficult life. Pleasure yes—a sort of feverish pleasure, all the nonsense, the laughter, the extravaganza of often rather tiresome jokiness; but of happiness, very little. And now that she had found it, with an all too typical withdrawal from reality, she blotted out all else, refused to let ugly subjects interfere...

A storm raging, teeming rain, coat collars pulled up, hat brims pulled down, voices, screaming, blown aside by the wind—neither for one moment connected the other with the meeting at the fallen tree.

9

‘ETHO?—YES, QUITE SAFE, ap-solutely soundo.’

‘All still a bit shattering, Rufie? Do we just stick?’

‘Yes, well... Bugs *everywhere*, my dear, one wouldn’t be surprised...?’ suggested Rufie uneasily and hurried on to say, as though they had been referring to no other subject, that the new boyfriend had turned up last night and stayed till dawn.

‘What did you think of him?’

‘I’ll tell you something,’ said Rufie, laughing, ‘he didn’t think much of me!’

‘On the stuffy side?’

‘You can say that again; but fallen for her, hook, line and thingummy.’

‘What does he make of recent events?’ said Etho.

‘My dear, will you believe it?—he doesn’t realise she’s involved. Never gets to see the morning papers, far too busy, from the moment he met her, to sit down to a nice read of *The Times*... She muttered to me to shut up, not to say a word about it.’

‘She hasn’t *told* him?’

‘You know Sari, Etho. She’d just blot it out. One thing at a time.’

‘Especially if it’s sex.’

‘It’s more than sex this time,’ said Rufie. ‘He’s even free for matrimony.’

‘Poor Rufie!’ said Etho, who, himself playing it ever cool and detached, nevertheless had ears and whiskers to recognise the tremor in other hearts.

‘Well, yes—poor me; because one doesn’t quite see

oneself in a *ménage à trois* with Devigne, Esquire, F.R.C.S. Of course, God knows, I'd grudge her nothing; and she's dreadfully in love, poor love. But it's something else I rang about.' He recalled, however, the possibility of bugged lines. He said in Italian: 'You do speak the lingo?'

'I picked up a bit in Rome that time. I didn't know you did?'

'Yes, well, ditto.' He seemed to have contrived to pick up little more than an excellent accent, but it was enough to convey the history of last night's adventure with the rose. 'And now she wants me to trail off down to Wren's Hill looking for a man with a red rose and a Halcyon car. Of course I never meant it last night, I was high as a kite—'

So Etho rang up Sofy—he involved himself not at all in their exploits, looking indulgently on, but was no part of them—but Sofy had no car and moreover would be easily recognised coming out through the throng of reporters; rang Charley but Charley was at the hospital, working; rang Nan, but Nan was just that minute on her way out to an extremely important engagement. The fact was that Nan had meanwhile been set upon by her own eight best friends and submitted to a lecture: what on earth did she think she was doing, running around with all this riff-raff, what would Bertrand have thought of her? And now—involved in a murder, actually a murder, some sordid affair being headlined in all the worst of the gutter press... 'I have to meet my solicitor, you see,' said poor Nan, obediently bound for coffee and buns at Fortnum's, a little shopping with Mavis and then bridge at Lillian's. 'So I simply must go.'

Etho's ears and whiskers twitched again but he said that yes, yes, of course she must go; he'd get hold of Pony...

Pony would have been only too delighted to oblige. His

place within the circle of the Eight Best grew increasingly precarious but, despite Bobsie and Ronsie, his pursuit of Rufie seemed to grow more steadily as Rufie's regard, never very great, grew less; and here would have been an excellent opportunity to build up points. He was alas, irredeemably engaged for the latter part of the morning, but came forth with a suggestion—he would most willingly go to Heathcliffe Heights and help Sari escape in the wig and mud-make-up, drive her to Sofy's and then lend them his car to drive on. In the splendid grey Ferrari, then—Pony really did seem to have simply everything!—she and Sofy prepared to set off. 'First just a quick dash into your wee, though, Sofa, and return myself to normal...'

'Don't you think you'd do better to stay as you are? In disguise, I mean.'

'Oh, how bright of you!' said Sari. 'And no one knows you down there, I can shelter in the lee of the Jade Elephant and we shall be practically invisible.' Except to their Followers, she said, but this time calmly. 'Don't worry, it'll only be a couple of Size Twelves, and with them on my tail, I nowadays actually feel safer.'

Sergeant Ellis, in fact, took only size nines on the neat little feet at the end of his too-short legs and he it was who, with only one of the original Size Twelves, now trailed them in the quiet black police car. 'You had a rough time yesterday, take it easy today,' Chief Superintendent Charlesworth had said to him benignly, handing him this tricky assignment on a plate. 'Nice run out into the country.' Rufie had indeed been not too far wrong in doubting the entire privacy of calls from the flat in Hampstead. A gentleman had been on duty, quite competent to milk from the halting Italian a proposal to go down to Wren's Hill today in search of a Halcyon car; and—the story of the red

rose. A constable on duty outside the flats on the night following the discovery of the murder, had had his own Size Twelves on the mat before Mr Charlesworth for reporting only the snatching up from a flower-bed of some car keys, and failing to observe the rose.

Ginger, therefore, relaxed comfortably, letting his subordinate do the driving; ‘And don’t strain yourself, Bill, we know they’re making straight for Wren’s Hill...’

And nor did Sofy strain herself, branching off the motorway, tooling along happily while Sari, her immediate aims predictably forgotten, drooled on happily about her love. ‘This time, Sofy, it’s real. It’s *real*. For both of us. I mean, I really do think that this time, it’s for ever.’ The early morning blur common to her awakenings had long misted away, her happiness shone like a star. ‘You don’t know, darling! A man all of your own who loves you and really sort of—cares about you! To feel safe at last...’

‘I’m glad for you, darling,’ said Sofy, who now would never know that kind of safety in all her life. It would be terrible if Sari got married and moved away from them all; but who could grudge her all the goodness that might be coming to her at last?—beautiful, sweet Sari, so giving and deserving of love. She ventured: ‘He actually is divorced?’

‘Free as air. Of course there’s this absolutely monster child complete with monster Nanny and I fear that nothing will induce him, not even me, to pack them off to Mummy where they long to be; but I’ll tell you one thing, darling, not one week will I spend at Hilltop or whatever, with wild originality, it calls itself.’ She embarked upon a lively description of Phin’s house. ‘Even a bar in the corner of the drawing-room, decorated with ever such amusing figures of drunks; and someone, who could only be departed Ena, has painted on them little black Mandarin moustaches and large

straw hats, so whimsical! can you imagine?—presumably to fit in with the Chinese decor or Persian or whatever it is—'

'Persians don't have Mandarin moustaches?'

'Well, but there are camels and the Chinese don't have camels; or do they?' She broke off suddenly: 'Sofy—quick, over there, turn in at that pub!'

A small pub-cum-restaurant, done up very chichi, with an outside sign, THE HEAVENLY ANGEL.

And standing outside The Heavenly Angel—a shining black Cadmus 3000—a Halcyon.

Sofy wrenched the Ferrari across the road, to the momentary discomfiture of Ginger and Bill, a mite too close behind. 'Go by the side door, Sofy, there's parking there too and we can creep in that way.' Sergeant Ellis, reconnoitring for a not too obvious concealment, saw that they stationed themselves round a corner from the bar. He despatched the constable to telephone to Charlesworth for advice, ordered a pint of bitter and settled down to keep watch, from his nook.

The place included a restaurant for lunches and dinners—('Tomato soup and scampi for the yobbos, Sofy, and madly enterprising pates for the discerning, what'll you bet?')—and the bar, with a woman serving before the gantry and a young assistant. Otherwise it was empty but for a blonde perched curvaceously up on a stool, with the carefully careless tendrils of hair known in the tonsorial profession as turds, and a pretty little face lit by a sort of not un-engaging childish silliness. A miniature poodle sat solemnly on the stool beside her, its fur brushed into clouds of silky white. 'A Pimm's for me,' she said to the barmaid ('My dear—how predictable can one get?') '—and his usual, please.'

‘His usual?’ said the girl, bemused.

‘Oh, I’m sorry—you’re new here. A little drop of sweet Martini for Monsieur Pow, poured out into—’ the older woman, accustomed, passed over a shallow ashtray. ‘Pow, short for Powder-Puff,’ she confided as though keeping it out of the dog’s hearing. ‘Well, he does look like one, doesn’t he? Or Pouf as the boyfriend wittily calls him and one must admit that he does seem just a tiny bit That Way. Monsieur Pouf—*trés gai!*’

‘A French poodle, you see,’ said the older woman, evidently familiar with this gambit, helping out her young assistant.

‘Yes, he is and too utterly Left Bank, he doesn’t believe in anything, do you, darling?’

In the L of the room, Sari and Sofy made sicking-up motions into their hands. ‘My dear, one word more of all this tweetiness and I shall go ap-solutely beresk!’

‘Well, fancy!’ the barmaid was saying, rather wretchedly.

‘But talented! Sing your song, darling, till your Uncle gets back from the ‘phone. Sing for the lady!’ She sat the tiny creature into a begging position and began to croon, solemnly conducting him with a newspaper rolled into a baton. The poodle lifted up its damp black nose and soulful almond eyes and now and again emitted a low moan. ‘So come on, now—our song!’—and she sang in a high, fluting voice, rather sweet on the ear—

‘Cerulium was beautiful, Cerulium was fair,
She lived with her grandmuzzer in Gooseberry Square,
She was my ducky-doodleums but now, alas she
Plays kissy-kissy wiz an officer in the ar-till-er-ee!’—
and fell into a tinkle of laughter. ‘Oh, darling, beautiful!
Only—your accent, we simply must practise and practise...’

A clock chimed the half hour. She glanced up at it. 'He's a long time. Who can he be ringing up? One of his damn women, I suppose.' She unrolled the newspaper and began plucking off little pieces from the corners. 'He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not—' But a man appeared from around a corner and she jumped down from her stool and flung her arms about his neck. 'He loves me!'

Sari's true love. Phineas Devigne.

Sari said very quietly: 'Oh, Sofy! In his buttonhole—that's the same red rose.'

Ginger made a mad dash for the police car. The Halcyon was turning out of the drive, on to the road. 'Get after him! But don't let him suspect.' The girl with the poodle emerged, looking shaken, climbed into a smart little sports car and drove off in the same direction. Bill said, accelerating, 'It's the man we saw yesterday, Sarge. At the pub, The Fox - after that fuss about the car keys being stolen. Never seemed to have seen her before, Morne, I mean—but took her in charge and went off with her. That's the same man. Only he was driving a Rover, then.'

'Well I'm damned!' said Ginger.

'Comes rushing out, gets into this Halcyon and drives off. White to the gills, he was; carrying a newspaper flapping open...'

'The girl had the paper. He took one look at the headlines—went, like you say, white as a ghost, said some word to her and bolted out. I think she thought he'd done his nut.'

'I'd rung Mr Charlesworth like you said. He said to stick with the car—if it seemed at all promising, stick with the car and play it by ear, he leaves it all entirely up to you.' Bill, eyes on the road, jerked his head back towards the

place they had just left. ‘What about them two? Miss Morne?’

‘I think she was absolutely thunderstruck, seeing him there. And yet she seemed to be there—well, spying; and now if you say that she knew him... It’s all a bit complicated,’ confessed Ginger, rolling in his seat a bit—the Halcyon was making very good time along the narrow road; his mind registered that the man drove as though he were well familiar with its twists and turns. A couple of miles on, he said: ‘Here’s where the tree fell, Bill.’

‘Yeah, well we saw it yesterday, me and George, following them down to The Fox. Rummy business that!’

It was all a rummy business—so rum as to almost blot out its own ghastly centre—that pitiful Thing, crammed down behind the driving seat of a shining new Halcyon car with, as it now seemed, lying on the dead body, a dying dark red rose...

And now—a gentleman with a Halcyon car, who wore in his buttonhole a dark red rose.

Nanny met Phin in the hall and stared up, leerily, into the haggard white face. ‘My goodness—you look gashly! Had a shock, have you?’

‘What?’ he said, his hand clawed across his forehead. ‘A shock? Yes—yes, a bit of a shock.’

‘Heard the news at last, then? That Miss Sari Morne of yours... Time you come in last night,’ said Nanny, ‘or call it this morning—and rushing off out again, first thing, well, you wasn’t esactly at leisure to settle down to a read of the papers?’

He only half heard her; said dully, ‘Yes, I got an early ‘phone call, I had to go out.’

‘Ringing up all night, they were. And what could I say

—you wasn’t back yet.’ She looked him over again, vaguely puzzled. ‘It seems really to have shook you up. She never told you—?’

‘No, I...’ But the front door had remained open and two men now appeared there. ‘Who the devil are you?’

‘Sorry to disturb you, sir. Police, sir. Sergeant Ellis,’ said Ginger, sufficiently recovered to be settling into one of his roles, whipping out the credentials, tucking the badge away again, the quiet, confident young officer, pouring oil with one hand, busily stirring up trouble with the other—‘and this is Constable—’

‘What on earth are you doing here?’

‘It’ll be about the murder,’ said Nanny, eagerly. ‘You knowing Sari Morne and all.’

He made no protestation or denial; simply said in that dull way, ‘You’d better come in then,’ and led the way through to the sitting-room. Sergeant Ellis perched his round behind on the edge of a chair, gazing around with simple admiration upon the Bad Habitat. Phin pulled himself together. ‘Nanny, ring the hospital and say I’ll be held up—’

‘Tell the Register to get on with it?’ prompted Nanny, bossily familiar.

‘The Registrar,’ he corrected automatically. He went over to a small bar tucked away in a corner, decorated rather amusingly, to Ginger’s mind, with little moustachio’d figures in appropriate stages of drunkenness. ‘I’m sorry, but I must get myself a drink.’ He lifted a bottle with an interrogatory glance; Ginger, palm forward, held up a disclaiming paw, observing, while the victim went about his business with a trembling clink of glass against glass, that he had a fine garden here, sir, hadn’t he?

Phin turned away from the bar. ‘Yes, well you haven’t

postponed a radical hysterectomy for a nice horticultural chat?’

Ginger would have liked nothing better: deep, velvety crimson—fragrant—vigorous growth—tendency to mildew... ‘It’s your Josephine Bruce, sir. Lovely dark colour, haven’t they? Always wear one in your buttonhole, do you, sir?’

‘Buttonhole? What the hell are you talking about?’

‘Well, you’ve evidently heard about this murder? And, on the woman’s body—’ He broke off. ‘You won’t mind if my chap here takes a few notes, sir?’

‘Notes? What about? What’s all this got to do with me?’

‘You do own a Cadmus 3000, sir, a Halcyon?’

His face grew very cold. But he came straight to the point: ‘You’re not suggesting that I was the man who changed cars with—Miss Morne—at this fallen tree?’

‘If anyone changed cars with her. The body was found in her own car.’

‘God knows, I don’t mean to suggest—’

‘Miss Morne knew the woman. She speaks to her at the cinema, gives her a lift home, on the way they quarrel; Miss Morne gets her hands on the woman’s throat—and she’s dead.’

He swung away, so that the liquid in his hand spun in the glass and slopped over the edge. ‘That’s—obscene.’

Ginger sat forward in his chair, bottom out-thrust, fingertips together, looking up at him, eager, inquisitive, a chipmunk. ‘What would *you* say happened?’

‘I don’t know, I’ve hardly skimmed through the thing. But—she’s a highly-strung creature, the mind can play funny tricks. The tree fell—and I believe a tree did fall the night before last—but just after she’d passed. Severe shock. Then later, immediately, any time—even before the tree fell

—she came upon the woman by the roadside, dead or dying
—might even have been killed by the fall of the tree.'

‘Strangled by one of its branches?’

‘Strangled? Oh God! Well—killed then, and left by the wayside and Sari—Miss Morne—found her there, got her into the car and—either then or when she got home, realised she was dead...’

‘And went off to bed and never mentioned it to anyone. She’s had time since’, suggested Ginger looking down at his own peaked church door of fingers, ‘to have mentioned it to you?’

‘Well, I’m telling you—three shocks in a row, she simply fled from the whole situation, let her mind close over it; like scar tissue closing over a festering wound. It happens, you know.’

‘Meanwhile making up this rather clever story about the fallen tree?’

‘Not impossible at all; and by now she quite believes it really happened.’

‘Only why?—if she didn’t kill the woman?’

‘The mind is very strange; it does play these tricks.’

‘Well, no doubt, sir...’ But the chipmunk attitude was wearing on the neck. Ginger rose and went to a tall window, looking over the small orchard where even yet a few apples still hung, golden, among the turning leaves. ‘So you’re saying she never met anyone at the tree.’

‘I’m saying it’s possible. If she did, well, there are other Cadmus cars about; it wasn’t me.’

‘You weren’t out at all, that night?’

‘Yes, I was. I went to the cinema, I can prove that, I spoke to the woman at the ticket box, she can tell you—’

‘No, she can’t,’ said Ginger, reasonably. ‘She’s dead.’

‘Oh, dear God—! Well... Miss Morne herself could tell

you,—she ran into me there; though I didn't know then that it was her.'

And it was true that Sari had said that she'd run into a man in the cinema; (meeting him later, however, had not troubled to add that this proved by coincidence to have been Mr Phineas Devigne whom she had later met again at the pub called The Fox.)

'What time would you leave the cinema then?'

'I don't know. About ten. Whenever it closed. I had to see a patient—a difficult pregnancy; then I came home.'

'Arriving—?'

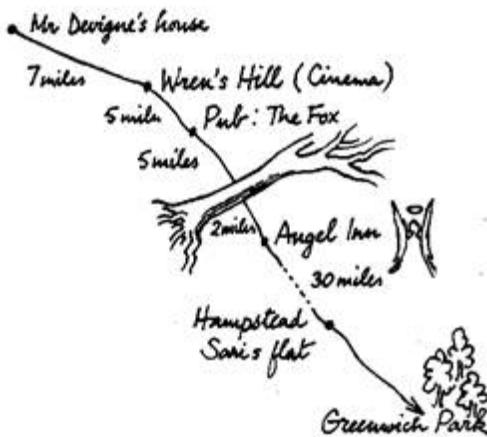
'What is this? A cross-examination?'

'No, no, sir,' said Ginger, all innocence. He explained: 'Miss Morne claims to have met a man answering to your description. I'm not even asking you officially. If you object to replying—'

'Of course not,' said Phin. 'Why should I object?'

'Well, that's what I thought, sir. But thank you *very* much,' said Ginger, tamping down any sign of smugness at having succeeded in this neat little ploy, 'for telling me so. So you won't mind just playing it, sir, that you did change with the young lady at the tree?' He stifled repudiation by producing his own notebook and a Biro pen, and proceeding with an outline sketch: a long, squiggly worm of road running upwards intercepted by stabbing, blobs of ink.

Ginger's map



'Your place *here* Mr Devigne. Seven miles on, here's this little town, Wren's Hill, and the cinema. Ten miles on from the cinema to where the tree fell—*here*; and here, halfway between the cinema and the tree, The Fox, where Miss Morne pulled in for a drink: five miles from the cinema and five miles on to the tree. And then from the tree, that'd be about thirty miles on, to Miss Morne's block of flats in Hampstead—i.e. where the body was found.' He tilted back, chin flat against his neck, to look appraisingly at his work as though it had been a minor piece of art, jabbing with the pen point at each blob. 'Just rough figures, of course: forty miles from the cinema to Hampstead where the body was found, ten miles from the cinema to the tree. And, coming back the other way, sir, fifteen miles or so from the tree to your house, *here*.'

'I don't know what on earth you're on about,' said Phin.

'Well, sir, but you agreed to play it that you did swap cars with the lady. So then—just playing with it, like we said—the question would be—how did the cars get swapped back?'

Phin returned to the cabinet, poured himself—but

carefully, measuring it out—a smaller second drink. Keeping his mind clear, registered Ginger; we're coming to the tricky bit. 'O.K., Sergeant, we'll play it that way. For no obvious reason, I find myself at the far side of the fallen tree. I swap with Miss Morne, I drive back here...' He strode over to the door and called, 'Nanny!'

Nanny was not far to find, ear only just not clamped to keyhole. 'You couldn't have a more reliable witness,' said Phin to the Sergeant. 'Nanny has no love for me—have you, Nanny? So now tell this gentleman—on Saturday evening when I got home from the cinema—'

'—and seeing your patient at The Fox—'

'What time would that be?' said Ginger.

'Bit past eleven—'

No time then, to have killed the woman this side of the tree, turned back and exchanged the cars *then*. 'And I put the car away?' Phin was saying.

'In the garridge—'

'And locked the garage, sir?'

'Did I? I don't know. It was the hell of a night, I made a dash for the front door.'

'Soaking wet, you was,' said Nanny.

'And next morning I was duly at breakfast, Nanny?—and I spent the rest of the day with you and Ena Mee—that's my daughter, Sergeant—in the park at Greenwich and later on at the zoo; and brought them both straight home and put the car away again—'

'Miss Morne's car had been found long before that, sir, with the dead body in it. Early afternoon, we already knew it was here.'

'Very well then.' Neither he nor Nanny made any false pretence as to her having listened at the door, being aware of what had already been spoken. 'So, Nanny—just tell him

the simple truth. Was there ever the smallest opportunity for me to have driven forty miles to Hampstead and exchanged the cars and driven back home?’

‘Well—not as I can see,’ said Nanny, grudgingly.

‘The day after the murder, then, sir, the Sunday morning—you did drive up to town?’

‘I drove up to Greenwich, Sergeant, and Greenwich is twelve miles at least the other side of London from Hampstead—if that’s what you’re thinking?’

‘You’d come by way of Hampstead?’

‘No I wouldn’t and I didn’t, I came straight down the Finchley Road.’

‘Didn’t stop on the way—?’

‘What, with those two in the car, and commit some skullduggery? No, I didn’t. We drove out to Greenwich, then we went to the zoo and were there till it closed and I was with them every minute. *So!*’

So, agreed Ginger within himself. Aloud, however, he suggested respectfully: ‘Bit of a funny place to go for a picnic, sir, if I may say so? Fifty miles from your home, right across London and you with all this countryside around you.’

‘Just what I bemarked,’ said Nanny. (Still, it had been nice getting a glimpse of the streets and the shops and all that.) ‘So, “Why?” I said. But of course by that time, Ena Mee—’

‘I had an errand there,’ said Phin briefly, cutting off the flow. ‘I thought we’d make a day of it.’

‘Oh, so you did leave the nurse and the child—?’

‘For at most ten or fifteen minutes. Nanny?’

‘Ten minutes,’ admitted Nanny. ‘I was looking at me watch. Bored to death, sitting there, nothing but grass and trees; and Ena Mee, “What’ll I do *now*, Nanny?” Pore child:

Mummy would have taken us to a nice restrong—'

'May I ask you what was this errand, Mr Devigne?'

'I wanted to leave a message for a patient,' said Phin, briefly.

He added: 'Whose name I am not going to give you. Her affairs are private. No one was in after all, I did not leave any message, so it wouldn't help you if I did.'

So... It did seem what Ginger called to himself a bit of an imparse. And all during the night, the tree had lain across the road, itself an imparse. Still... The chap lived here, he'd know the country pretty well, the side roads. 'After Mr Devigne got home that night—' he said to Nanny, '—the night before, we're talking about now, the night of the storm—after the cinema and seeing his patient—he mightn't have gone out again? (You won't mind my asking, sir?' he said limpidly to Phin, 'we did agree to play it this way?)'

Dearly as Nanny would have liked to make trouble, she was obliged to admit defeat. 'No, I don't see he could of. I mean, I'd always know when he goes out in the night, urgent calls and that; *and* when he comes in late,' added Nanny, getting one in there, anyway. 'I keep meself sleeping light, account of Ena Mee.' She gave a virtuous sniff. 'In case the pore child has one of her nightmares, Nanny has to be ready to get up and comfort her. Crying for her Mummy, like as not.' At Phil's chill glance, she hurried on, slightly mollifying. 'And Sat'd'y, I was awake anyway, what with me tooth. He never went out again that night—I took his wet mackintosh off him and hung it up in our bathroom to drip, Ena Mee's and mine, and that's right through our room; and next morning, well, I've got to be fair—none of his clothes was wet, his shoes was drying off nice and anyway, like I say, I'd of heard him go out and come back.' She had

privately made her own arrangements to keep watch on him so as to report back to Mummy; and now admitted, ‘Door of his room creaks somethink chronic; and there’s rose-beds right outside his window...’

‘*Thank* you, Nanny,’ said Phin. He looked into Ginger’s face with a sort of indulgent triumph. ‘Just exactly what the gentleman wanted to know.’

‘Yes,’ said Ginger, permitting himself, without too much difficulty, to look crestfallen. But as Nanny, bridling, went to the door, he put one more question. ‘Nanny—when Mr Devigne went out that Saturday—would he have been wearing a flower in his buttonhole?’

‘A flower?’ said Nanny. ‘Well, of course.’ He always did wear a flower, her voice implied, surely everyone knew that much? ‘Mummy used to say—Madam used to say—it was his trademark, bedside manner and all that.’

‘The patients like it,’ said Phin with the cold glance again. ‘Old dears in the wards—they don’t get bouquets sent to them, I’ll take out the flower sometimes and give it to one of them and they think they’re in heaven.’ Lovely, glamorous Mr Devigne, he added, with an almost bitter self-mockery; and did not add that quite a few ladies who *did* get bouquets sent to them, also thought themselves in heaven upon receiving this tribute from lovely, glamorous Mr Devigne.

‘Oh,’ said Ginger. And that day, he asked, hardly able to keep his voice steady—the day of the murder—had Mr Devigne happened to give away his buttonhole that day?

‘No, you hadn’t,’ said Nanny. ‘I took it out of your lapel when I took away your mackingtosh to dry, and put it down the lav.’ One of them chrysanths it had been, she added, a little white chrysanth with a nice bit of fern. She’d got it for him herself, that morning, him being in a hurry...

So what price old Charles and his deep red roses now?

10

SARI DROPPED SOFY OFF at her flat and drove on in the Ferrari to Heathcliffe Heights. ‘Oh, Rufie...!’ Like two sad monkeys, they perched on the great, long sofa, each with an arm about the other, holding close. ‘My poor dovey darling, when it all sounded so lovely and you were so happy—!’

Dear Rufie, ever warm and loving, kind, patient, selfless in devotion. ‘This time, darling, I did think it was for real, it was so—well, immediate, so wonderful and sort of—sincere. That’s what I thought—sincere.’

‘Perhaps it’s all a mistake about this other girl?’

‘Oh, no, she was calling him “the boyfriend”, she threw her arms round his neck...’ She reached out with her left hand and fumbled a cigarette alight. ‘We’re two poor things, Rufie, aren’t we? What becomes of people like us? It’s all right now, but when we get older? Everybody falls in love with me, but nobody seems to want to marry me, do they? —and, you, what happens to you, darling, so mixed up and after all, not being *able* to marry anybody? I mean, I know you can settle down with another gay person and lots of people do and it’s happy and wonderful; only you’re like me, no one seems to settle down with you, either.’

‘I know,’ said Rufie. ‘It’s frightening, sometimes, when one lets oneself think about it. When we’re old and people don’t care about us any more... You’ve got money, you’ll always be all right in that way at least, but what am I? Hand to mouth, and if Cecil takes a turn against me, as at any time he may if the drawings don’t come the way he wants them—well, hand to mouth, but nothing in the said hand.’

‘I’ll always share with you, Rufie, you know that. Perhaps we shall end up like this, huddled together, two pore old things with nobody to love us but each other. And I do love you, darling, of course I do, you know that; only it’s not like—being in love and having a home full of Bad Habitat and the kiddywinx and—well, forever-ness.’ She said wretchedly: ‘I mean—not meaning it beastlily, darling, but—I mean, being gay and all that, you can’t *quite* understand.’

‘Do you really think that?’ said Rufie, sadly. ‘Even you? After all—one’s still a human being, even if one is a so-called queer. Hath not a queer eyes?—hath not a queer hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you poison us, do we not die? Because we may be “queer”, Sari—have we not hearts? And if we have hearts—just like anybody else’s, may they not break?’

‘Yes,’ she said humbly. ‘I’m sorry.’ They were silent. She suggested at last: ‘But there are other hearts. Perhaps, some day—?’

‘No,’ said Rufie. ‘You see, among our other unexpected qualities, we may even have fidelity. There was another heart once; but not for me. I hardly knew him, he never even glanced my way—’

‘Angelico?’

‘Angelico.’

‘You did but see him passing by—?’

‘And yet must love him till I die.’

‘Well, that’s the way I feel,’ said Sari. ‘This time yesterday, I didn’t even know Phin but I meant it and I thought he meant it. I thought for both of us it was for ever. And then in walks this dreary little Cerulium.’ She laid her aureoled head against his shoulder. ‘Two pore things aren’t

we, darling?—you and I.'

And so they were back to Cerulium and the morning's adventure. 'Here was this ghastly female, my dear, too sick-making, you couldn't have *believed!* Leaps up and half strangles him and I can't say he took much notice of that, just snatched up the newspaper from the bar and stared at it as if he'd gone out of his mind; and rushed madly out of the pub.'

'He'd seen about you and Vi Feather and all this ghastly horror?'

'He must care for me a *bit* or he wouldn't have been quite so shattered?'

'Perhaps he doesn't really love the other lady?'

'Oh, yes, it's been going on for ages. We didn't know what to do, Sofy and I; we decided to come home, so into the loo for a quick wee and who should be there but the barmaid, the one that had obviously worked in the pub for some time. So of course she never connected us with Phin and that little Horrorbags, so I said how ever so sweet about the poodle, I'll tell you about that later, Rufie, you'll throw *up!*—and she said rather austere that yes, very sweet only it got to be rather a nuisance in the evenings, especially at weekends when they were crowded. So I said, Oh, she even brought darling little Pow in the evenings? and she said well, yes, every Saturday... And what it comes to Rufie, is this, that they were there on Saturday; Phin was there with her—and it's two miles this side of the tree. So he *was* at the tree.'

'But you saw him in the cinema?'

'All a bloody trick! Tells that ghastly Nanny he's going there—establishes himself—oh, my God, yes, that's it!—draws attention to himself, giving his buttonhole to Vi

Feather so that she'll remember him.' She mimicked: ' "My Mr Adam, I call him, and every now and again he'll take the flower out of his buttonhole and present it to me with ever such a gesture!" Oh, well—poor thing, it's wrong to make a mock of her now, but that was it. Then he leaves by the emergency door and they go there for dinner complete with Monsieur Pouf as chaperone. She, meanwhile, has been to the matinee and clues him up on the film so that if Nanny gets nosy he can't be caught out. No wonder he was in such a panic to get past the tree! If Nanny knew he'd been out that way—'

'What's it got to do with her?'

'She wants him to be found out having an affair with a patient, which little Horrorbags is, I suppose—and then she could blackmail him into letting her and the Monster Child go back to Mummy. It wasn't so dangerous with me because I'm not a patient.'

'Horrorbags being married, I suppose?'

'Yes, the barmaid settled down for a splendid chat—the pub was empty, lots of time. Obviously a husband at home but on Saturday he goes out and plays billiards or something or other, and she's O.K. if she gets back before he comes home. So they'd always have one eye on the clock and that night they duly departed at half-past ten. And Rufie—two miles to the tree; and the police say it was twenty to eleven when the tree fell.'

He stared at her almost wildly. 'But that means that *she* must have been at the tree.'

'That's what I worked out—driving back from Sofy's just now. She must have been.'

'You didn't see her there?'

'Well, all that storm, pitch dark except for the headlights; and I turned away and was hunting in the car

for a bit of paper to write my address on. She could have crept under the tree then—they'd both be worried about being seen together; and while I was scrambling under, she could have hopped into my car which by then was *his* car, and crouched down out of sight until we both started backing and turning; and then, flat out for home before Hubbens, or whatever cute name she doubtless calls him by, gets there!' And so to an old grievance. 'So you see, *she* saw me there, *she* knows I did exchange cars, none of you has ever believed me—'

He couldn't be bothered with all that for the moment. 'The thing is, Sari, this means that she must know about Vi Feather.'

'Oh, well, Vi Feather—there must be some other explanation about Vi Feather.'

'What do you mean, some other explanation?'

'You don't think I'd ever believe that Phin killed Vi Feather? Of course he didn't!'

'You say that, only because you're in love with him.'

'Who needs a better reason? I know him. And he's just not that kind of person.'

'*Somebody* killed her.' He got up off the couch. 'God, it makes me feel sick—just remembering her...'

'Oh, Rufie, you're not going to start smoking? You know the stink upsets me.'

But he needed it. They had created an ingenious hiding place, rolling white paint round the inside of a jar until it dried, dropping into the space in the middle the small plastic bag, with a sort of lid of dried paint rammed down on top of it. Even tracker dogs, Sari had said, with visions of splendid pale labradors feathering about the flat, would be put off by the smell of the paint. Rufie himself was slightly put off by it but one smoked pot not for the pleasure but for

the effect. Much misled by Edgar Allan Poe into believing that anything left conspicuously visible was thereby rendered invisible to investigatory police, they kept the paint pot with the rest of the clutter on the mantelshelf in the big untidy sitting-room. He rolled a cigarette and got it smouldering. She was hunched up on the couch when he turned back to her, hands fisted on the low back of it, her forehead butted against the fisted hands. ‘Oh, darling—you’re upset now!'

‘Of course I’m upset, of course Phin didn’t do it, he couldn’t, he’s a person who saves lives, he couldn’t have killed her!’ She raised her head, stared back into his face resentfully. ‘She was killed in mistake for me. People were following me—I’ve always been watched and now since they’ve wanted Aldo to marry this Italian girl, they’ve been following me. None of you believe me, you’ve never believed I really was followed, you don’t really believe about the tree. But you have to believe about Vi—and who could want to kill *her*, poor wretched, scrawny little thing, and who else would want to kill *me*? They were following me, they shot ahead...’ And now she sat upright, her hands unfisted themselves, her eyes grew bright. ‘I tricked them at the pub, the followers; they shot ahead of me. They passed before the tree fell. But they heard it fall - and when someone came staggering up the road behind them, they thought my car had been held up by the tree, they thought it was me, trying to find some way to get home... And in the dark and the storm—they got out of that horrible little car, like a black beetle crawling along the road, and they killed her. They thought it was me.’

Rufie was terribly pale. ‘They can’t have... I mean ...Well, anyway, what could Vi Feather have been doing there anyway?’

‘I don’t know, or how she got into my car or how my car got into the garage, when I’d swapped it with the stranger—well, with Phin. But why does everyone try to find someone in this country who’d have killed her? Of course it was the Juanese—’ And she leapt to her feet and caught him by the wrist and stood intently listening. ‘Rufie! There’s someone outside the front door!’

Chief Superintendent Charlesworth, assiduously collecting contributions to his collage, brought in hourly by investigating minions, sat surrounded by scraps of metaphorical feather and fur (not to mention haddock) complete with imaginary canvas and large pot of glue. He had been much exercised as to the mysterious message which Phin had failed to deliver on the Sunday morning after the murder, to a lady living in Greenwich; and had been at great pains to discover that such a patient indeed existed and, despite his protestations, a female patient—one of Phin’s Harley Streeters, as departed Ena had keenly deduced—who might suit the description; who duly had been away from home had not expected a call from Mr Devigne, and was all wide-eyed astonishment at the possibility of his having intended one. And now there was a second lady, it seemed, discovered by Sergeant Ellis at a place called The Heavenly Angel. *She* might settle a thing or two, thought Charlesworth. While he waited for further telephone calls from Ginger, currently snuffling about the environs of Wren’s Hill like a portly uniformed piglet in search of truffles, he settled back and gave his mind to such fur and feather as appeared to relate to Phineas Devigne.

Motive easy. He dabbled in his glue-pot and affixed a positive ostrich feather. A consultant surgeon, having an affair with a young married patient, and scared to death of

being found out: things were easing off a bit, these days, but gynaecologists were always at special risk and he would certainly be in very serious danger indeed of finding himself struck off the Medical Register—no longer allowed to work, his reputation in ruins and, worst of all, brought to a pass where he must hand over his child to the untender mercies of an emotionally unstable mother. And Vi Feather had seen him regularly at the cinema and might well have discovered that he did no more than pass through the auditorium on his way to his meetings with his mistress. Black mail, then? It had emerged, from among the details now being unearthed, that he had been in the habit of presenting Vi Feather with a flower. A five pound note, or a ten, wrapped round the stem? A signal for an assignation? A couple of Ginger's truffles joined the ostrich feather. A very possible Why now reasonably established. He turned his attention to the How.

He and the blonde—Mrs Harte her name had turned out, most appropriately, to be—had left the pub at half-past ten. Heartsease, as the lady's house was called ('How predictable can you get?')—was a little off the main road, which still was not much of a main road, on the way back to Wren's Hill; six or seven miles from The Angel. Comfortable time, therefore, to drop her off there before the billiard-playing husband should return home. But meanwhile—a few minutes for the dash through the rain from the pub door to the Halcyon, to settle down, complete with Monsieur Pouf, to drive carefully off, peering through storm-washed windscreen at the twisting road ahead. And two miles beyond the restaurant, the tree falls.

They are past the spot before the tree falls? Sari Morne observes the twin Halcyon crossing with her as she approaches the spot and so later conceives the idea of the

exchange story?

Or they are not past the spot when the tree falls? Phin's passenger is present at the exchange of the cars?

In that case—what does she know about the death of Vi Feather?

Impossible that she should have known already about Vi Feather—should have dined with her lover, revealing to the staff—who all knew her quite well—no outward sign of agitation or distress. After the dinner then? Had the woman been waiting for him beside his car, springing out upon him with her ugly importunities? Had he, in his frantic anxiety, hardly knowing what he was doing, taken both hands to the scrawny throat and obliterated the threat? To Cerulium's advantage also, that their affair be not betrayed; might she not have kept quiet ever since about that almost accidental murder?—turned her head away while the body was thrust into the back of the car, agreed to silence for ever regarding an event which surely need never be traced back to herself? And yet again... Three days later she is perched on a stool in the course of a luncheon date with 'the boyfriend', playing foolish games with the powder-puff poodle, like a happy child. Mr Charlesworth by no means underrated silly little women—they played quite often a fearsome game of bridge, might be foolish and yet shrewd, look frail and be as tough as old boots; but a visit back to that place of hideous memories had been totally unnecessary: the thing simply was not on. She had known nothing about Vi Feather's murder. It had been committed after he had left her.

Or before he picked her up to take her out to dinner? What would Vi have been doing, out there at The Heavenly Angel, twelve miles from the cinema in Wren's Hill? Was it not more likely that, aware of his habit of leaving before the film even started—it was the main feature, there would be

no more customers, she would be free to gather up her takings for later collection, and depart—was it not more likely, then, that she would await him outside the cinema, in some perhaps familiar out-of-the-way place of rendezvous, for just such handing over of blood-money? And that there, in the darkness and storm with not a soul in sight, he had lifted his hand?

Why not have left her lying there? Lest someone, perhaps, had noticed his, coming out through that little-used side door? Drive somewhere out of the way, dispose of the body elsewhere? But time pressed; he must account to his lady-love if he arrived late, and she might perhaps at some future time grow suspicious. So—nobody about—he picks up the small body, conceals it in the back of the car, perhaps with a rug thrown over it?—forces himself to remain calm until he shall be free to rid himself of it again...

To rid himself of it.

He does or does not exchange cars at the fallen tree with Sari Morne.

Does not exchange cars and drives on to Wren's Hill in his own, with the body in the back of it.

Does exchange cars and Sari Morne drives on to London in his car, with the body in the back of it.

But next day, the body is found in the back of Sari Morne's car.

Imparse, as Ginger would have said.

A knock came at the door; it was Ginger himself.

Sergeant Ellis had been visiting a lady. A chat with the local police had uncovered a useful little fact which could serve as an introduction and general cover-up. He assumed his most unctuous approach, the body slightly bent forward, the inward curling paws against in-curving chest. A

thousand pardons for intrusion, his attitude appeared to implore. From the police. That little Thing about Mrs Harte's car the other evening—

Mrs Harte clasped Monsieur Pow and raised piteous eyes. 'I thought that was all finished with? I know I banged into the bicycle—'

Mr Harte was twice the age and three times the girth of Mrs Harte and had fairly evidently been chosen' entirely for his ability to provide expensive sports cars and pedigree poodles; other attributes must be looked for elsewhere and had doubtless been discovered in Mr Phineas Devigne. He was stalwart, however, in defence of his lady. 'Of course it's all finished with. The damage was paid for—'

'There remains the question, sir, of the second bicycle. Of course it was raining very heavily, Saturday night—' said the sergeant indulgently.

Fear leapt into the china blue eyes, the ringlets shook with her sudden trembling. '*Saturday* night—?'

'What are you talking about, officer? What second bicycle?

There was only one bicycle involved—I was with Mrs Harte myself at the time and anyway the whole thing happened on the Tuesday.'

Ginger drew out a notebook and with anxious deliberation scanned through its pages. 'It says here Saturday, sir.'

'She was never even out on Saturday, were you, my dear?'

'No, of course not,' said Cerulium, shifting the dog to one arm and with the other clinging prettily to Hubbens. 'In all that awful storm?'

'It says here, clearly, Madam, Saturday last, eleven o'clock, p.m.'

'On Saturday last at eleven o'clock, officer, Mrs Harte was here at home. I was out at my bridge club—' (not billiards after all then; indeed the gentleman was hardly the figure for clambering about baize covered tables) '—and I got home well before eleven and here she was as usual to greet me...'

'Pow and I were sitting at the piano, rehearsing,' said Mrs Harte, piously. 'Weren't we, darling?'

'Yes, you were,' said Hubbens, though in fact she had been addressing her fellow musician. 'So you see, Sergeant, you're quite mistaken. The whole thing's a muddle.'

No one knew better than Ginger how to inject into his voice the right note of the blunderer at bay. 'I'm afraid I have to admit that it is, sir.' He took a chance on exchanging with the lady an infinitesimal invitation and she followed them as he was impatiently ushered into the hall. At the front door he paused, frantically feeling about his uniform pockets. 'Oh, dear, I'm sorry, sir, I really am sorry, sir; I can't seem to be able to find my car keys.'

Anything to be rid of the man! 'I'll fetch them, I'll fetch them,' said Mr Harte, fussing back to the drawing-room.

'Not the bike really,' said Ginger the moment his back was turned, conspiratorially muttering. 'But I didn't want to say anything.'

'Not about—? Oh, my God! Oh, no, you didn't, and thank you!'

'So, tell me quickly—two cars?'

'Yes. Mine out of sight, not to set them off wondering. In the evenings, anyway.'

'And you away first?' At her nod, he broke off and ran back to the drawing-room door. 'Sorry, sir, terribly sorry; here in my pocket all the time, must have slipped down into the lining...' Flushed with confusion and self-deprecation,

he was gone.

‘Damn fools! They haven’t got a brain in their heads,’ said Hubbens disgustedly.

There had been no one at Sari’s front door—no one in the corridor outside. But, caged in in the letter-box—an envelope: a large, squarish envelope of fine quality, unaddressed, but with a heavy circle of red wax embossed with a seal. A rose, formalised, not unlike the Tudor rose of England. But this was the Juanese rose; the seal of the Hereditary Grand Dukes of the island of San Juan el Pirata.

And inside, a single folded sheet of writing paper, with a rough sketch, in pencil and coloured crayons, of a ring: a large oval centre, faintly tinged with blue, set about with a scrollwork set with smaller diamonds; and slotting into the scrollwork, other jewels—a ruby, an emerald, a sapphire and the pale, pale pinky gleam of pearls.

The great betrothal ring of San Juan: superimposed upon the scrawled figure of a woman, red cap over yellow hair, blue coat—lying with legs and arms like broken sticks, all askew.

She stood white, juddering, holding the thing as though it were a snake, horrible and venomous. ‘Oh, my God!’ she said. ‘Oh, my God!’ And after a moment: ‘I’m going to be sick!’ She fled to the bathroom and he heard her coughing and retching there.

The glass pot with its white painted lining stood in its deliberate un-obscurity on the wide mantelshelf. Rufie went over to it and rolled himself a second cigarette.

So Rufie rang up Etho. ‘It’s OK. Soundo. But, my dear—’

‘Asleep? It’s four o’clock in the afternoon.’

‘She’s exhausted. You can’t *think* what things have happened. We couldn’t all have in a bit of something here

this evening?’

‘What things have happened?’

‘Well, she’ll tell you tonight. Ap-solutely rivvy! Do let’s all have a bit of a round-up?’

‘You sound very high,’ said Etho, suspiciously.

‘So would anyone be. You’ve no idea! Well, I mean for one thing—the Followers have surfaced.’

‘What d’you mean?—they’ve surfaced?’

‘She’ll tell you.’

‘Well, all right,’ said Etho. ‘But just let *me* come and hear about it, don’t drag in all the others. We don’t want a party.’

A party was just exactly what Rufie did want. ‘I have been fortunate in everybody’s ready concurrence,’ he said, coming at last to Nan. ‘I bet you don’t know who I’m quoting?’

‘Jane Austen,’ said Nan; and from the bleak pleasures of Lillian’s slimming lunch complete with crumb by crumb recital of the benefit of its components, a small fizz of bubbles began to rise in her heart. She had refused the blandishments of Lillian’s George to stay on for the evening: ‘Come on, old girl, it’ll do you good, buck you up, we’ll all go out and have a nosh-up as the youngsters say, even if it does have to be nut cutlets and slippery elm for Lil’s sake...’ What man in all her own circle and Bertrand’s would issue an invitation in the authentic accents of Mr Knightly, arranging a party at Donwell Abbey, for gathering strawberries? ‘Oh, Rufie—the temptation!’

‘My dear, when you hear what she’s got to tell you—ap-solutely riveting!’

‘Well... I do just happen to have some cold salmon that I don’t know how to get through... Oh, and I had a present of some slippery elm, you wouldn’t care for that?—it’s

terribly good for one.'

'You just bring the salmon,' said Rufie. 'Who cares what's good for one?' And indeed—who cared? There had been more fun and vitality in half a dozen words with one of Them than in all the buns and coffee and nut cutlets of the rest of the day.

And immediately upon his ringing off, the telephone shrilled again—and it was Phin. 'Goodness!' said Rufie—'had you heard about the party?'

'I don't know anything about any party. I'd like to speak to Sari.'

Sari was awake and sitting huddled on the couch, absently listening to his round of phone calls. She came alive immediately; shrank back into a nervous agitation—took the receiver at last and said shakily: 'Yes?'

'I'd like to talk to you. Just very briefly.' His voice sounded cold and yet urgent. 'Could you meet me somewhere?'

'Where would you suggest?' she said. 'The Heavenly Angel?'

'A silence. 'Well—that's one of the things I'd like to talk about.' He said again: 'Just briefly. In fact I have a thing afterwards that I have to go to, I mean I'm speaking at a meeting, I've got to be there. You wouldn't just have a drink with me? Tell me where?'

'The Ritz,' she said. 'That little sort of balcony, opposite the Piccadilly entrance.'

'At six? I have to be at this place by half-past seven.' He added with a chill in his voice, 'And I gather *you* have a party?'

'That's right,' she said 'Jazzing it up on saucerfuls of sweet Martini. Do come—and bring any girlfriends, complete with operatic pooches!' Let him sit in the bloody

Ritz, she said to Rufie, and sort *that* one out. Does he really thing I'm going?

'You know damn well you're going,' said Rufie. 'You want to know what he's got to say to you.' So it boiled down to a question of what she would wear. 'Your amber-coloured floaty one and the dark yellow shawl?'

'Oh, no, they go together, darling. The horror of things matching...'

'So you see, you *are* going,' said Rufie, laughing outright.

Sari loved the Ritz with its dignity and spaciousness, the huge dining-room with its coronal of gilded flowers, looking out over the Green Park. She always made her well-to-do boyfriends take her there for their meetings. But this time it was different; this time it was a parting. He rose from the small table at the back of the balcony. A waiter appeared as by magic and placed a chilled glass before her. 'I ordered champagne cocktails. I think we can both do with one.'

'I never drink alcohol,' she said.

He repeated: 'I think upon this occasion you can do with one. I certainly can,' and as she sat down, perching uneasily on the little, upright sofa, put the frosted glass into her hand. 'We both have some explaining to do.'

'You can ask me for my explanations,' said Sari. 'I won't trouble you for yours.'

'Mine relate to a lady.'

'I don't think gentleman should offer explanations about their ladies.'

'This one is no longer my lady,' he said. 'That's what I want to explain.'

'She doesn't seem to know it. She refers to you freely as "the boyfriend" and picks the petals of a newspaper to

establish whether you love her or love her not.'

'You appear to have been doing your homework,' he said rather grimly.

'Are you by any possible, conceivable chance suggesting that I've been spying upon you and your love life?'

'Someone seems to have briefed you, that's all. Someone who *was* spying.'

'No one knows anything whatsoever about any girlfriend of yours,' she said very bitterly. 'Least of all me. Though I see now why you preferred not to take me to The Heavenly Angel for dinner.'

He signalled to a waiter. She had hardly touched her drink and now put her hand over the glass, palm down, in a gesture of repudiation: that long narrow hand, curving up and backwards at the tip, nails very long, varnished a pearly pink, the fingers blemished like a child's by small stains and abrasions where hot candle-wax had dropped during the abortive Batik work upon Rufie's nightshirt, or stains from an orgy of tie-and-dye which had proved ineradicable... Under the light of the chandeliers, the autumnal hair glowed almost luminous in its soft 'en brosse', the amber chiffon clung tight or floated free; the knee bones of her elegant, long crossed legs gleamed whitely through taut nylon. All about them, heads were turning, murmurs growing... Sari Morne... In the papers... Marvellous film... But who's the super gentleman...? She was not so much unconscious of it as so accustomed that it affected her not at all; he, for his part, wished devoutly that she had chosen somewhere less conspicuous, but had not dared imperil her concession in meeting him by arguing about the rendezvous. 'One more for me, then,' he said to the waiter. 'Large. And tell him to double the brandy.' To Sari he said:

‘I am not in the habit of running two love affairs at the same time and I’m not going to remain in your mind as having done so.’

‘Well, that’s easy,’ said Sari. ‘I’ll dismiss you from my mind altogether.’

‘I can only say,’ he said, ‘that it won’t be so easy for me to dismiss you from mine.’

“You did but—have a quickie—passing by

And yet must love me till you die?” ‘Oh, Sari!’ he said. ‘Don’t make it all so cheap! I fell in love with you in that first moment in the cinema—something happened, something turned over in my heart. At The Angel—well, as you say, a man shouldn’t talk about his girlfriends; but this is important to me. She... Well, gynaecologists get this kind of thing, patients do rather fling themselves at one. And... It’s a year since my wife left me, and I’m a man. I meet a lot of women, I meet them in circumstances of—total privacy. Fooling about with patients—it’s madness but I’d been through a hell of a time with Ena, perhaps I *was* a bit mad. But I was coming to my senses, making a huge effort to end it all, apologising, trying to explain—’

‘The lady at The Angel doesn’t appear to have heard what the gentleman said.’

‘I’m afraid she didn’t want to hear. And it was all from the point of discretion; and discretion, I must say, is not her second name. But that night, at dinner—I was trying to talk seriously to her—’

‘Breaking off the affair—on account of expediency?’

‘Breaking off the affair, if you will believe it,’ he said, ‘on account of you. Yes, I’d been wanting to end it anyway. But that evening, just for a split second at the cinema, I’d held you in my arms...’ He shrugged hopelessly. ‘You won’t believe it, and that doesn’t too much matter. But I won’t

stay quiet and let myself be accused of making love to you when I was still—bound in any way to her. She knew I wanted to end it—'

'He loves me, he loves me not,' said Sari, plucking imaginary fragments from a newspaper, but a small spark was beginning to glimmer in her arid heart...

'It was not a matter of love,' he said with a sort of resentful impatience. 'We both knew that; it was purely a physical affair, a bit of fun and excitement on her side and on mine, a few hours of respite now and again from a life of sheer hell, cooped up with a small girl and that God-awful woman, fighting a losing battle with her for my child's affections.' Infinitesimal bubbles rose and broke on the golden surface of champagne. He sat staring down into the half-empty glass. He said at last: 'That's all I wanted to say. If you dismiss me from your mind, O.K. But while I remain there, I'm damned if I'll remain as a double-crosser, starter off on yet another shady little sexual affair before I've finished with the last.'

She said slowly: 'Why should it mean anything to you, what I believe?'

He shrugged. 'It means something to me because I was in love with you.'

'You *were* in love? You put that in the past?'

'One or two things have happened in the meantime, if you remember.' He finished his drink. 'Which we will not go into.'

But now the spark was all ablaze again in her heart. 'Not go into them? But of course we must! Phin—everything's all right. At the tree—'

'The police have examined that situation exhaustively. I did not meet you at the tree. I was past it before it fell; Samantha was home by ten to eleven—'

‘Oh, is that her real name?’ said Sari. (Sofy would be enchanted. How predictable—?)

‘—and I couldn’t have got her there by that time, if I’d been held up at the tree.’

‘Well of course not,’ said Sari. ‘You didn’t have to, did you? She started off a bit before you and got past before it fell. She had her own car.’

He seemed almost stunned into silence. ‘You must think the police are very innocent,’ said Sari. ‘They do use their loaves you know. But it all doesn’t matter. It was my Followers, we’ve got proof, they’ve all got to believe it now, the police and everyone.’ She outlined to him rapidly the story of the letter’s arrival, the big white envelope sealed with the crest of San Juan, the crude sketch within, of the ring and the sprawled dead body of Vi Feather. ‘So you see —they killed her. And this was—a threat to me.’

He listened, almost breathless, seemed about to argue, was caught by that word, a threat. ‘But I’ve *told* you,’ said Sari, ‘I keep telling everyone. They killed her in mistake for me.’

‘You told me you knew where the ring was. If you’re actually in danger from them—surely you could now tell them where it is—’

‘But there’s something else I can’t tell them. The ring could tell them something—and I think they believe that the ring has told them something. But only I could really tell them. And I can’t.’

‘You terrify me,’ he said. But a clock chimed. ‘Sari—absolutely, I’ve got to go.’

She rose with him and stood looking up into his face. ‘Yes, I know. You said you’d have to. But... Oh, go ye in love or go ye in war—?’

‘Shall we dance at our bridal one day, my dearest

dear?' said Phin; and before an electrified audience, kissed her hand and lost his head and caught her close to him and kissed her lips; and with his long stride left her, standing in heaven there.

11

THE FLOATING CHIFFON LAY like a limp rag now that its owner was no longer inside it, flung across the treeless jungle of her counterpane. She had changed into shocking-pink calf-length pants and a long, box-y jacket of bluebell blue and, lit to radiance by her happiness, looked, Nan thought, more beautiful than she had ever been before. But they were all so wonderful, so funny, so gorgeous!—how could she ever have let all those drears talk her back into buns and coffee and a little shopping, even at Fortnum and Mason's? Sofa had apparently given up hopes of the new kaftan and wore a garment known as 'the tent', in muted mushroom shades—'A dreadful mistake, Sofa, we've told you millions of times, lots of bright, bright colours and big patterns, to make you look even fatter and then everyone thinks you *want* to be... And Nan, that terrible suit!—I mean, too beautiful, darling, I know it cost a bomb and a marvellous colour, I adore it, but then don't go and wear that toning-in scarf with it—really you're in deadly danger of its becoming an "outfit". I've got a sort of shawl thing, acid green; Rufie, what do you think...?' And Charley in the seventh heaven among these wonderful friends, so deeply admired and cherished, 'I am bringing big curry self-made, and Tandoori chicken no colour, anyone can putting red colour with chicken but it is like I am wearing black boots with bowler hat.' The thought of Charley in a bowler hat, never mind the colour of his boots, sent them all into a near hysteria of laughter and indeed hysteria was nowhere far from any of them; Sari in a sort of wild ecstasy; Nan and Charley as ever caught up in the magic of an acquaintance so alien to their

own unimaginative backgrounds; Rufie, who loved her, too high on marijuana to give his whole mind to Sari's present situation; Sofy and Etho who also loved her, frightened and anxious, for more reasons than one. Only Pony, entering with the inevitable contribution from the Italiano shop down the road, was neat and precise as ever. 'Oh, Pony, how clean and pretty you always look! Don't let Rufie take the bowl, darling, he's simply not responsible this evening. Put it in the kitchen—cold salmon and curry and Tandoori chicken *and* spaghetti bolognese!—what a glorious mixture! —Nan you must have some of each, to make up for the slippery elm...'

'They'll offer me a series on this,' said Sofy with glistening eyes.

'Pony, you've heard?—I'm about to become a stepmother—'

'Poor Sari, the most ghastly stout little lump, she says, smelling strongly of cold cream—'

'Yes, but what a papa!'

The evening roared on. Replete with a little of everything (not to hurt anyone's feelings) she curled up at last on the floor beside Etho. He looked across at Sofy and gave her a tiny, only half-humorous wink, across the glowing head resting with childlike confidence against his arm. 'I hate to tell you, Sari dear, but at this close range, the Oxford English marmalade is showing a decided touch or two or penicillin.'

Sari shot upright, clapping her hands to the crown of her head. 'You don't mean it?'

'From up here, I do have a rather clear Fleming's-eye view.'

'But I'll have to go to Luigi!'

'What about the boyfriend?'

‘Because of the boyfriend.’ She was on her feet and peering into a looking-glass, anxiously parting the mossy hair with her fingers. ‘Oh God, how awful! You don’t think he noticed?’

‘Who, God?’

‘Oh, shut up!’ she said, laughing. But it was disaster. ‘I couldn’t let him see. I mean he’s—well, not exactly—I mean he’s rather a—’

‘Stuffed egg,’ said Rufie.

‘He’s nothing of the sort.’

‘Well, *I* thought he was.’

‘I daresay he wouldn’t be too mad about a kite-high homosexual—’

‘Well, there you are,’ said Rufie, taking no offence whatsoever. ‘What I said—he’s conventional.’

‘Yes, well, he certainly wouldn’t want his beloved with penicillin sprouting out of her hair. Oh, God, what am I to do?’

‘A quick dash over to Luigi; what else?’ said Etho, with the glance at Sofy again.

‘Oh, I couldn’t go *now!*’

‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Let alone a little abstinence,’ said Sofy, playing along with Etho.

‘Oh, no, it would kill me! On the other hand... But anyway, I’m broke, not a farthing. Etho, you wouldn’t—?’

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ said Etho. ‘Half your allowance is in bond to me already.’

‘Sari, I hadn’t told you yet, because of all this, but I’ve got a job coming along; quite a penny or two and I’m sure I could get a sub. Not a lot and one has to eat—’

‘Oh, yes, Sofy, and especially you; but I wouldn’t dream of it, thank you, darling, of course I couldn’t...’

Etho’s glance had turned discouraging. Sofy subsided.

‘Well, I might not really even get it.’

Pony, very quiet and humble, ever courteous. ‘Sari, I would be so happy—’

Sari did not look at Rufie; but, ‘No, Pony, thanks a million, but I couldn’t. It’s between—us lot.’ She looked around her. ‘Rufie, what could we sell?’

‘There’s not much left,’ said Rufie getting up and skipping about the room in search of disposable possessions. ‘You could finish Sofa’s kaftan, and we could flog that.’

‘To two people,’ agreed Sofy amicably. It did not enter her head or anyone else’s that it was she, the ever hard-up, who had paid for the yards and yards of material involved.

‘It wouldn’t begin to give me enough. God knows what the air fare is now, return, to Rome; and then having to stay there and then Luigi.’ She stood in despair. ‘I’ll see what’s in the wiggy-pig,’ and off she went anxiously, all major anxieties apparently forgotten, returning with it, a large pottery creature, brilliantly blue, slit down the back to receive contributions. A great deal of shaking and probing came up with only thirty pounds. ‘Well, it’s all no good, that would hardly even cover Luigi. What shall I do?’

Sofy knew perfectly well that any hairdresser in Mayfair could have given the same treatment—if they remembered how to do it, for it really was miles out of date. But Sari was above bothering over what was or was not in fashion: if something suited her, it suited her, and Sofy dismissed the vague speculation which she occasionally exchanged with Rufie, as to whether Luigi might not be just an excuse for these periodical outings. Etho would have no part of it—he said simply that with Sari it was second nature to do things the glamorous way, the ridiculous way; well, yes, if you liked, the perverse way. And she saw now that Etho, having spread his gossamer web, was about to

scuttle over it like a spider and wrap up the fly in its threads; and watched with tender amusement as he turned guileless eyes upon Nan. And Nan duly bursting out with it, diffident but thrilled. ‘Sari, you wouldn’t like me to come with you? It’d be my treat, I’d pay for everything—’

Something changed in Sari’s face; an odd look, a wary look came into her eyes. ‘Oh, Nan, no, honestly—!’

Nan’s face fell. To go to Rome—and with Sari! Who had ever been so wonderful as Sari?—fly off to Rome, like Frank Churchill in *Emma*, going all the way up to London to get a haircut—though in fact of course, it had been to buy a piano. Rufie must have been having the same thoughts for, out of his happy haze, he suggested: ‘You wouldn’t happen to want a piano, Sari, for the new life among the Bad Habitat? You could get one in Rome when you go there with Nan.’

‘Why are you all so keen for me to go with Nan?’ said Sari, almost suspiciously.

‘Because she’s offering to pay,’ said Etho equably, ‘and you’re mad not to accept.’

‘Oh, do come, Sari!’ said Nan, gathering courage again. ‘We could make a little jaunt of it, it needn’t cost you a farthing.’ Her mind played with happy calculations: two air fares, hopefully Sari’s idea of an hotel wouldn’t be too opulent—a bit extra for meals and things. She could manage that all right. ‘I’d even make you a presie of Luigi’s attentions.’

If she expected any outcry of appreciation, she was disappointed. Had it been she who had been in need, they would without hesitation have passed round the hat. Now they all said, as though no favour at all was involved, ‘Sari, that would be lovely, do go with Nan!’ and suddenly Sari’s hesitation was gone, she said oh, goody gumdrops, how

super and they'd go this minute because of getting back to Phin as soon as possible...!

Nan was enchanted. 'How lovely, I'm so thrilled, darling, it'll be wonderful! I'll do all the bookings, just leave it all to me—'

'Good heavens,' said Sari, 'don't bother about that! There's sure to be something or other flying to Rome, aeroplanes do it all the time, you just have to go to the airport and get into one of them.' And anyway, she knew a lovely man who ran something or other at Heathrow; if there happened to be no aeroplanes flying, her tone implied, he would simply lay one on.

'About the hotel, then—'

But Sari knew of a wonderful hotel, she always went there, quite near Luigi's, to be easy to get to him. Its charm appeared to lie largely in the fact that the proprietor and his wife simply hated their guests and made things as beastly as possible. 'They're Sardinians, actually, The Sardines they're known as, far and wide, and the guests all hate them in return and gang up on them, it's rather fun. We all go back and back and keep meeting each other there, and ganging up some more.' Last time there had been yet another lovely man who had rescued a temporarily solitary Sari from the ferocious attentions of The Sardines, and he had turned out to be something super at the Vatican and taken her simply everywhere, places no one else ever got to. She embarked upon a lively picture of His Holiness, when she had burst in upon his orisons in her Garden of Eden drawers. 'You remember the Garden of Edens, Sofy?' Sort of calf-length shorts, terribly expensive, but when she'd got them home, Rufie had said they were quite inexpressibly dreary and they had fallen upon them and painted them up a bit: Expulsion from Paradise, Eve on one leg and Adam on the

other—Rufie had thought they might practise on the shorts and he could sell the idea to Christophe et Cie, but, though they hadn't meant it in the least, the snake and the Tree of Knowledge coming slap in the middle had looked a bit peculiar if you took them wrong. And everyone had taken them wrong, Mr Cecil had had fits and as for the poor Pope...! She went off into one of her charades, the stricken prelate confronted, all unprepared, with Scenes from the Old Testament in this curious guise. But Rufie, perceptions heightened by the drug, thought, while he leapt upon the abandoned kaftan and draped it around the papal shoulders, that the familiar rising hilarity had about it a dying fall. When Sari was in love, it was dreadful how deeply, how fearfully, how anxiously she was in love; and he knew that now, once again, she was in love and that the intensity of her need was frightening her.

The collage was progressing, though largely in a negative way. But that was better than nothing; to know what to discard was as important as to know what to keep in. The minions had been out and about, stuff, stones, fur, feather and haddock skin clutched in their hot hands, enquiring into the recent and past lives of everyone remotely connected with Vi Feather, Sari Morne or Phineas Devigne, abandoning here a scrap of material, there a piece of grit, as a lead proved unprofitable. And it always came back to the extraordinary business of the alleged exchange of cars; the discovery of the body in, as it were, *The Wrong Box*.

On one question, however, Sergeant Ellis, returned from Herts, could offer a positive—if negative—contribution. 'I thought I'd fish around and see whether the girlfriend could tell us anything, Mrs Harte. Well—not about the murder, she can't, sir. She knows nothing about

Vi Feather, I'll swear to it. Frightened, yes; but that's in case the husband discovers what's been a-going-on. I never let on to him anything about that.'

'Not much hope for her, poor bitch,' suggested Charlesworth, 'when all this other business comes out.'

'That's *right*. But anyway, like I'm saying, I went along to this Heartsease—Harte's Ease, you see?—rather good that?' said Ginger, appreciatively. 'But no dice, sir. She knew nothing about it and no reason why she should. She drove her own car. He'd give her a couple of minutes' start, not to get the two cars identified too close together I suppose, and then follow. So she couldn't have been in on it, sir: absolutely. You can take it from me.' He leaned back in his chair with a look of extreme smugness on his beaming round face. It sent old Chas mad when he thought you were pleased with yourself.

And Charlesworth did not fail him. 'All these exertions you might have spared yourself, by simply ringing up The Heavenly Angel and asking.'

Ginger pretended to be doing his best to conceal a smile of kindly mockery. 'Well, no sir. The lady told me herself, sir. They didn't know about the two cars at The Heavenly Angel.'

But it was all, for the moment, faintly academic; for into Charlesworth's life had come the little matter of the message from the Followers.

The police had so far given very little credence indeed to the fantasies about the Mafia Rossa, the Followers and the ring. But now...

Sari had been emphatic about the message. Yes, that was the seal of San Juan as far as she remembered it; she had seen it on letters to his son and heir, from the Grand Duke Juan Lorenzo. But anyway, you could look it up in

Pears or somewhere, couldn't you? Police examination showed clearly that the envelope had been stuck down and sealed with no possibility of the letter having been inserted after it was closed—only by someone, in other words, who had possessed an envelope with a seal and been able to use that for the note. The paper and envelope were of good quality, which, said Sari, quite jelled in with the Grand Duke's habits, since he had been to Eton or Winchester or wherever it was and was madly anglicised, and entirely likely to have had his stationery sent out from Harrods. On the other hand...

'On the other hand,' said Ginger, echoing the same thought to Mr Charlesworth, 'the woman died on Saturday night and the message arrived early on Tuesday afternoon. Not much time for it to come from San Juan, even if someone had telephoned the information about the murder. And no stamp. So that would mean that there's someone here working for them; and that means that that same person could have sent the note themselves.'

'Any further glimpses of the obvious will be equally welcome,' said Charlesworth.

'Yessir,' said Sergeant Ellis, woodenly, but within him, rebellion rose like a bubble; I'll show him, the supercilious sod!

'No address, no handwriting anywhere on the whole message; envelope sealed with water not licked, i.e. no saliva. In other words, nothing that could be analysed—'

'Nossir,' said Ginger. What in a sergeant was obvious, in an officer was apparently merely evident.

'—which would suggest that the sender was someone in this country who might be identifiable.'

'Yessir.'

'The murderer, or a friend, pretending to give an air of

reality to all this rubbish about the Juanese—'

‘—and fortunate in having the Grand Ducal seal of San Juan to add a little touch of veracity.’

‘If it’s the Grand Ducal seal,’ said Charlesworth, playing straight into the outheld hands.

‘Oh, certainly sir, it’s the genuine seal,’ said Ginger, with an air of quiet confidence which he knew to be most maddening to his Chief Superintendent. He turned the envelope over in his pudgy hands. ‘Designed by Tomaso di Goya, you’ll recognise his touch, sir? But some years ago—you can see that the seal is well-worn; this is a good strong impression but it’s blurred at the edges and Tomaso di Goya never blurred anything at the edges. The modern Cellini, they call him nowadays—’

‘You don’t say!’ said Charlesworth.

‘—direct descendant of Goya, the painter. I mean, where was Goya during those three years between the time he escaped from Madrid and turned up in Italy—?’

‘You tell me,’ said Charlesworth.

Ginger had every intention of doing so and at as much length as possible. ‘Almost certainly on the island of San Juan el Pirata. The murals in the Duomo—that would be the Cathedral—’

Charlesworth finally lost patience. ‘Never mind the bloody murals—’

‘Well, they are rather bloody, sir; the cathedral was built by the original Juan the Pirate, to his own glory, and he was a proper old sadist; and Goya, having just got out of Spain, was at his most gory—’

‘For God’s sake,’ said Charlesworth, ‘must we have the whole damn travelogue—?’

‘Of course it’s only my theory, sir,’ said Ginger, limpidly apologetic. ‘I get a bit carried away.’

‘Well, will you kindly carry yourself back and apply your theories to a little matter of murder in rural Hertfordshire; and never mind San Juan el Pirata...’

‘San Hoowarne, sir, if you’ll excuse me, sir,’ said Ginger, giving the aspirate all he’d got.

‘So what you’ve taken three thousand words to say is, that the seal appears to be genuine.’

‘Yessir,’ said Ginger, meekly.

‘No doubt you know every detail of its composition, but could you answer in one word—is this a correct drawing of the ring?’

‘Allowing for a slight error in perspective—’

‘I don’t mean as a bloody work of art. Is this the ring?’

‘Yessir. With all its additions in place. The extra jewels slot in on sort of concealed springs, very ingenious. But then of course, Tomaso di Goya—’

‘All right, forget Tomaso di Goya, for God’s sake! All I care is—this is the genuine seal and this is a correct representation of the Juanese, all right Hoowarnese, ring? Complete with sketch—rather amateurish but spare me further excursions into the realms of Art—of the dead woman’s body?’

‘Yessir,’ said Ginger. He seemed about to continue but closed his mouth again.

‘You were going to say—?’

‘No, sorry, sir. Obvious again.’ And obvious indeed it was. So let the old bugger work it out for himself.

‘Miss Morne has always insisted that she was being followed by these *Hoowarnese* enemies and the woman was killed in mistake for herself.’

‘It enlarges the circle,’ said Ginger.

‘Yes, well we won’t get weaving on the right angle of the hypotenuse... They follow her, they kill the wrong

woman... Where do they *find* her?’

‘They find her outside the cinema,’ suggested Ginger, diffidently shrugging. ‘Kill her there, discover they’ve got the wrong woman, bundle her into their car and set off after the right one. She dodges them, gets back home, parks her car, they move the body into her car—’

‘Why?’ said Charlesworth.

‘By way of a warning,’ said Ginger; and added sweetly, ‘Obviously?’

‘And then bat off safely back to San J—Hoowarne?’

‘Cleverly contriving, however, to be here on the Tuesday, pushing notes through her letter-box.’

‘All right, that’s enough,’ said Charlesworth, finally exasperated. ‘You’re huffed because I made a crack about something you said being obvious. You can now come down to earth, please, we’re not playing games.’

‘Yessir, nossir, I’m sorry sir,’ said Ginger, continuing, however, to play games. He assumed the pose of chastened small boy, sitting looking down at the hands clasped between his knees; and twiddled his thumbs, awaiting the next pronouncement of all-cognisant God.

‘If Miss Morne is being truthful about that, perhaps all the rest is true. She did change cars at the tree. Either with Phineas Devigne or with somebody else.’

‘The conjunction of *three* identical motor cars at the same place at the same time on the same night, does seem to stretch credulity to a fairly unacceptable limit,’ suggested Ginger in a voice that said, to a distinctly unacceptable limit, Don’t be a bloody fool!

Charlesworth chose to ignore it. He desperately needed cooperation. ‘I agree.’ And mollifyingly using the familiar name, ‘And there’s another odd thing, Ginger. Miss Morne now says that on the Monday, the day she met him at The

Fox and went off with him—Devigne wasn't driving a Halcyon at all. He was driving a Rover, which is why she never connected him with the man at the tree. Had you realised that?’

‘Oh, yes, sir, I thought everyone knew it. He was using his old car just for a day or two. He'd been running the Halcyon for a week and he wanted it checked over: not quite as smooth as might be expected.’

‘If you ask me, Mr Devigne is quite as smooth as might be expected and a good deal more so. He's got an answer to everything.’ But a further little matter had arisen to which Mr Charlesworth could get no answer at all. ‘She's not charged with anything, she's not even seriously a suspect, I don't see how I can prevent it; but what do you think the latest is?—la Morne has now decided that she wants to go off for a few days to Rome.’

‘To *Rome*?’ said Ginger, startled at last out of all affectation. ‘Whatever for?’

‘Well, apparently it's to get her wiggy fixed,’ said Charlesworth, sighing.

Nan, meanwhile, was in a state of blissful anticipation of all the preparations in the days to come, before they could be off and away to the complicated delights of a visit to Rome. They were off and away on the following afternoon without any preparation at all. Sari carried no luggage but the inevitable huge, bright painted canvas bag, into which she had presumably stuffed, along with all its other clutter, a nightie and large quantities of make-up; she was submerged deep in tragedy because in trying to extract the last farthing from the bright blue pig, she had dropped and broken it and might this not be an omen of something simply frightful? She and Rufie had been up all night, crawling about the

floor converting the kaftan into a voluminous tunic, brilliantly flowered, to be worn over tight pink trousers, with a huge straw hat covering the horrors of the penicillin hair. Thus arrayed, with only just comfortable time to spare, she strolled into the airport, asked for two tickets and in due course presented herself with Nan at The Sardines' hotel and requested accommodation; nor, despite a certain lack of charm, could Nan perceive in the proprietors any answering ferocity.

To Nan, Abroad was somewhere where you went to see things; but first, insisted Sari, they must go together to Luigi—Nan couldn't imagine what wonderful things he would do with that, let's face it, darling, *slightly* dull dark hair—Luigi proved to be a swarthy little man, all nose and after-shave, one of several identical little men who scurried about attending to customers apparently interchanging at random; but Sari was reassuring, 'Darling, yes, I know it looks awful at the moment, puree'd spinach, there's no other word for it. But it will be wonderful when they've done with you, honestly, all gloss and sheen, you'll see!' And indeed it did look rather beautiful though not a bit, thought poor Nan, *me*. 'So now, a bit of lunch, Sari? and then—I've got my guide book, but I expect you know Rome better than I do. St Peter's of course, and the Sistine Chapel, one can't ever miss those. And the Gesù?'

'Oh, no, darling, no, *not* all those fearful churches with people's legs hanging out of the pictures on the ceilings as though they were trying to scramble down, using one's poor head as a stepping stone...' And who could blame them? said Sari, so overcrowded up there, and such unsuitable company, any old saint clutching lilies or crosses or whatever, and far too many children for anyone's comfort, who could wish for a lot of stout-bottomed cherubim

incessantly interrupting the conversation, wanting to go and wee or whatever...? 'You can do all that stuff while I'm at Luigi's. Otherwise, let's just sit in cafes and *be* here.' And indeed it was lovely in the sunshine of an autumn evening, Rome with her tall, narrow buildings gazing at each other across the teeming streets, the colour of autumn itself, all ochre and gold. 'Arrived safely,' wrote Nan, scribbling postcards to such friends at home as were sufficiently liberal to be informed of this latest adventure. 'Easy flight. Writing this at marble-topped table in cafe in Piazza del Popolo, drinking a cappuccino and watching the world go by.' The world was going by at shattering speed with a roar and clamour of traffic, driving them behind the glass screen on the pavement; but Nan saw now that it was much, much better to just *be* in places than to run about looking at things. 'Arrived safely. Lovely here. Just moved up from P. del Popolo to P. Navona and having a campari soda, watching the world go by...'

Sari also wrote home, to Rufie. 'Have you ever noticed what a *nippety* way Nan eats? Love, Sari.' To Phin she sent off a flock of cards, each simply following the other in mid-sentence so that, taken out of order, they made difficult reading. What Nanny and the Monster might make of them it did not occur to her to wonder. She had got through to Phin and they had talked for hours and they were in love and going to be married and everything was wonderful. 'So you see, Nan, breaking my blue wiggy-pig wasn't a dire omen after all.'

'But, Sari, dear, one can't help saying—'

'Oh, darling, you're on about that tree business and poor Vi Feather. But it was all my Followers, we know that now, and even the police have had to take them seriously so, God knows I'm sorry for poor wretched Vi, especially

getting killed in mistake for somebody else, but there it is, what can one do?' She dismissed it all. They were in Rome now, not even the Followers could know about that and, just for a little while, she could afford to be happy.

And she was happy. The anxiety and strain that Rufie had recognised as they fooled about over the Garden-of-Eden pants had been lifted by Phin's assurances of love. Warm and safe in their glow, her spirits scared up and away above the terrors of the past six days; blotted out for a moment at least the ever-present sick memory of that stiffened thing with its brittle, crooked limbs, crammed down into the narrow space, into the silence and darkness behind the driving seat of the car. And her Pore Horse was here.

They had moved to the Piazza Navona purely on account of the Pore Horse. 'It's always here, poor love, with its drooping head waiting to drag its beastly fiacre off somewhere, though no one ever seems to hire it. And the man is so horrid, just sitting up on his box, not worrying about it.' So every time she was in Rome she came here and gave the Pore Horse at least one tremendous meal, to last it till the next time, sending out a waiter with a basket of raw carrots from the kitchen and rolls and any fruit there was about; feverishly unwrapping the squares of crumbly sugar from the bowls on the table, adding them to the load. The waiter considered her to be mad and was terrified of the horse, but had long adored her, so beautiful and with such handfuls of lire to be handed over when the job was done. 'This is out of *my* money,' she said earnestly to Nan. But they couldn't eat with the Pore Horse still standing outside, even knowing he had had a good meal. 'Just a quick wee, darling, and I'll take you to a ristorante in Trastevere, it's simply frightful, ap-solutely not fit for two women to go

there alone. You'll adore it.'

Nan would frankly rather have been somewhere less fraught with dangers, but she was learning and only said gallantly that that would be ap-solutely super.

'It's a really gorgeous place, not like anywhere else, you'll go beresk.' They'd have chicking, said Sari, if there was any in the kitching; and she laughed and thought of darling Rufie (currently holding the fort in the flat with Pony, recent differences apparently patched up, to keep him company) and wished he were here. Not that Nan wasn't heavenly, trying so hard not to like the things she really liked, and it was wicked to tease her because in fact one liked them oneself; only she was so sort of guide-booky about them... But dammit, poor love, she was paying for it all. 'When I get away from Luigi tomorrow, Nan, we'll go to St Peter's, let's do that! You can look at everything, the only thing I really hate is all that barley-sugar baldacchino stuff; but I can always skip that and just go and goop at the Pieta and cry.'

'Cry? Oh, yes, because the Madonna was smashed up?'

'No, no,' said Sari, 'she's mended now. Only she's so beautiful. And to think of that young, young man doing her! —how could he have understood so well about suffering?' And indeed two tears welled up just at the thought of the mother sitting holding her dead son across her knees. 'I know I'm stupid, it seems so showing-off, but I always cry.'

A man came and stood beside their table; a respectful small bow. 'Signora, Signorina—if I might be permitted?'

'Oh, hallo!' said Sari, looking up, undismayed. 'Yes?'

'I have been discussing with my friend... One could not help overhearing how you were saying. It is true that Trastevere is not so safe at night. This is the quartiere of the criminals.'

‘Well, I know,’ said Sari in her pretty Italian. ‘But I wanted to take my friend to dinner at the Ristorante Ragazzo.’

‘Signora, you could not going there alone. Two ladies.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Sari, all complacent smiles. ‘However is that going to be avoided?’

‘My friend and I would be most happy...’ He looked down at her, deep bright eyes all aglow. ‘Please to permit!’ The friend came up from the neighbouring table, glass in hand. ‘Yes, indeed, ladies, would this not be nice?’

‘I dare say it might,’ said Sari. ‘Everything being even.’ She shushed down Nan’s anxious cluckings. ‘So first we’ll just have introductions and then we’ll all know, won’t we?’ Over intervening heads she called out in her clear, uninhibited voice: ‘Antonio!’

The proprietor came forward. ‘Signora? Ah—Signora Principessa—’

‘Principessa?’ said the two men, visibly startled.

‘Antonio, these two gentleman have kindly invited us to spend the evening—’

Antonio bent upon her a fondly humorous eye. ‘The Signora Principessa doubtless wishes me to explain first, that she is in fact Principessa di San Juan el Pirata—’

‘Ex., actually,’ said Sari. ‘But one still has what might be described as Powerful Friends.’ The gentlemen would have heard of the Red Mafia? They continued to form a sort of—bodyguard.

The gentlemen bowed deeply. Even without this protection, they suggested, they would have taken great care—

‘You just do that,’ said Sari, laughing a little, ‘and we shall do fine.’ So, the quick wee? she suggested to Nan, and then off to go!

Nan was by no means happy. 'Are you sure, Sari—?'

'Yes, of course, it'd be terribly dull, just us two females alone and we'd meet much worse people at the Ragazzo. I always pick up someone—why do you think I talked so loud about Trastevere? And now they've got all my resounding titles, they won't try anything on. Everyone knows all about the Mafia Rossa of San Juan.'

'But are you really still a Princess?'

'I suppose so. People are still Mrs when they're divorced. And this was a divorce, however much they call it an annulment; they pretend to be Catholic in San Juan, but they're not. The whole thing's too phoney for words.' She dived into a lavatory. 'Gosh, *not* very attractive in here! A quick wee indeed! Who would care to linger?' She emerged and peering into the rather dingy looking-glass, administered a going-over to the already perfect maquillage. She had tied a golden scarf over the offending penicillin and Luigi's first application (for the work took two stages), knotting it low on the nape of her neck, as though it were her own hair, pulled back and pinned into a bun. At the last minute, for fun, she had taken an eyebrow pencil and drawn a centre parting across the gold. It altered her, the demure Madonna hair-do framing the pure oval face, and Nan was to remember afterwards how she had thought that never had beautiful Sari looked more beautiful, more young, more vulnerable, more carefree, more spirituelle. For who could have guessed then, how soon that look would be gone?—that look of almost childish innocence, of serenity, of gaiety—how soon that radiance would be gone for ever from Sari's face. That this was to be the last evening, the last evening for ever, of happiness...

Their hosts, with Antonio in attendance, had a taxi waiting for them at the door. 'Principessa... Signora...' More

bowing as they were solicitously handed in. And the gentlemen introduced themselves. Pietro Zelli, Mario Parraci. Humble business men, no pretensions to royalty. And such royalty! A sugar Princess! They chattered away, flowery with compliments, jokes and allusions, all in their doubtful English, presumably for the benefit of the poor English signora. It was fascinating for Nan to drive through Rome as the Romans do, to pass the great columns and fountains, to chug across the face of St Peter's and not even glance out of the windows; to cross the Tiber as though one were crossing the Thames. Sari seemed to accept it all with an equal cool; she had spent a lot of time here in the days of *The Spanish Steps* and, since then, on her constant obligatory visits to Luigi.

Trastevere was beautiful, a maze of shadows in the failing light, the tall houses with their shabby ochre peeling away in flakes of gold-leaf, in their criss-cross of narrow streets. The men were coming out of the dark little bistros in ones and twos, conferring, looking up at the sky. 'They're calculating how soon it'll be dark enough,' said Sari. 'Time for a plate of pasta and then off to work!'

'To work?' said Nan, innocently. 'Are they all on night shifts?'

She laughed. 'Well but they're all burglars, *aren't* they?'

'Burglars?'

'Of course, I told you. This the quartiere of the thieves. But they're gorgeous people, I know lots of them.' And as they alighted, she pointed to a villainous-looking group across the street, 'In fact, there's Beppo! I must go and talk to him, he's a great chum of mine. You go on in,' she said to the two men, 'and find us a table. They'll hop it if anyone comes with me.' And she ran off gaily, hands outheld, wobbling across the cobbles on her high heels, the glittering

headscarf shining in the dim street lighting. ‘Hey, hallo! Buono sera! Come sta?’

The place was packed, tables close together, a motley crowd; the noise deafening. Sari joined them at last at their table. ‘Oh, he’s so sweet! He’s promised to pinch a car for us while we have dinner; it’s all getting so grand and fashionable round here, these days, that it’s impossible ever to get a taxi. A Lamborghini, would you believe?—emerald green, he says, to recognise it by. And he says he’ll drive us himself and simply bring it back here.’

‘*Sari!*’

‘I know, isn’t it lovely? No hanging about for a cab.’

‘But *Sari*—! ‘But *Principessa*—!’

‘It’s quite all right, he’s an absolutely top, top car thief, we couldn’t be in better hands. And if he doesn’t put it back, what business is that of ours? We just say we hired him. And of course I did hand over the odd penny...’

You could see the men registering dismay, privately determining to have no truck with stolen Lamborghinis of whatever colour. They ordered champagne, however, the best in the house, and were clearly enchanted, if a little daunted, by their captive princess who now turned out to be a captive film star also. What would she have? What could they offer her? Anything, everything was at her disposal...

‘What’s the most expensive?’ said Sari simply, looking up and down the immense menu.

They were apparently delighted with this response, standing up and clapping their hands for service, calling over the heads of other diners for camerieri. Under cover of their ecstasies of urgency, Nan implored her, ‘*Sari, dear, is this right, honestly my dear.—?*’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Sari, laughing, murmuring back. ‘Sock them for all you can get! Sugar Princess, indeed!

I'll sugar them!'

'Why do they—?'

'La Sacarissima, one of my titles, dear—so witty! So come on, caviare first, even if you hate it, mountains and mountains of it, they do it here with a tiny little bit of chopped onion, it's divine. And then, let's see... Beccifichi, they cost a fortune, but I couldn't possibly, poor little birds. They scrunch them up, faces and all, it's too dreadful. Tartufi on a fondue—that'll do. Are truffles in season now? —that would set them back a fortune...'

She was wildly gay. The dedicated teetotaller succumbed to vintage champagne and as usual when she drank alcohol, an almost feverish hilarity ensued. The Sardines built up into a splendid anecdote—last time she'd been in Rome, half a dozen of the malcontent guests had conspired to get behind the desk and alter all the number tags on the bedroom doors, with resultant total chaos, especially when the late-nighters returned; and she was into one of her acts, outraged spinsters bursting in upon nameless orgies going on in what they had supposed to be their own rooms, guilty lovers edging open doors and leaping into beds with unexpectant occupants, the drunks waking up next morning to find themselves surrounded by possessions not their own... And there was the lovely man who had introduced her to the Vatican and a further lively reconstruction of the scene when Il Papa was confronted by the biblical shorts. And the old, wild days with Aldo, rushing like two lunatics about Rome when she ought to have been working; the orchids, the presies and at last the great diamond betrothal ring of San Juan el Pirata with its additions of rubies and sapphires, emeralds and pearls, for births, marriages and deaths. You sort of slotted them into the main bit on little springs, most ingenious, though God

knew what it must have looked like by the time you came to be laid out in state in their rotten old Duomo, twice widowed and remarried, mother of twelve, grandmother of twenty, great-grandmother of thirty-four and all totted up in additions to the ring... And she tilted back her chair and pulled the tablecloth up to her chin, plonked the vase of flowers from the table on her chest, lay back with closed eyes in a grotesquerie of laying-out; meanwhile scrabbling about blindly on the table for small objects to be built up into a wobbling heap of colour on her stiffened, outstretched hand. Pietro and Mario professed themselves enraptured. 'Let us see it, let us see this wonderful ring?'

'Oh, good heavens!' She sat up, divesting herself of the accumulation of funeral trappings. 'You don't think I'd carry it around with me—and in Trastevere?' The famous canvas bag lay propped against the leg of her chair. She followed their glance. 'No, no—we can turn it all out on the table and you can look, but I think we'd finally be chucked out, such lashings and lashings of little packages of noxious drugs and things...' The gentlemen's eyes popped and they visibly shuddered. 'But of course I haven't got it anyway. Who could want such a thing? I sent it to the poor Pope to set him on his feet again after my apparition in the Paradisal panties.'

'To the *Pope*?'

'Well, anonymously, of course. I mean, *I* didn't want it and he does wear these huge great rings, doesn't he? for people to kiss and all that.' Though heaven knew, said Sari, what he would do with all the marriage and childbirth clips, poor love, or weren't they so celibate now with all these lovely ecumenical rules...?

Close packed about them, other diners listened, amused or horrified, joined frankly in their private laughter, came

across, drinks in hand, dragged up chairs and sat down at their table; from remoter situations voices called, jokes were flung back and forth, flowers caught up from their vases and tossed to her—till the whole place was in a happy pandemonium of noise and laughter and flying blossoms, the glittering gold head at its centre. When at last they rose to leave, half the house rose with them and marched them in triumphal progress to the door. Sari said, low voiced to Nan: 'To the right. The green one.'

'Darling, honestly—'

'Come on, don't be silly, it's all fixed up with Beppo!'

Their escorts had meanwhile privately arranged for a hire car to be waiting and now urged them towards it. 'No, no, my Beppo would never forgive me! Come on, Nan, you and I at least—' Pietro got hold of her by the arm. 'Principessa, this is too much nonsense—' but she jerked herself almost angrily away. 'Get in, Nan, get in!' She scrambled in after her. 'You chaps go in your car. Beppo is driving us home.' And she leant across Beppo and pressed on the horn till soon the whole neighbourhood was one scream of sound. Windows were flung open, heads popped out. 'Poor loves, they think it's the police. But I *must* clear the way!' And, horn screeching, as Beppo switched on the ignition, she urged the car forward. 'Out of the way, out of the way!' The crowd fell back, closed in behind them. 'Thank God, that'll prevent those creatures from getting through! Beppo—magnifico!' As they screeched round a corner on two tyres, bumped over cobbles, turned again and yet again, she explained. 'You wouldn't have recognised it, Nan. But of course they were Followers.'

Nan hung on frantically, swaying from side to side in the bucketing car. 'Followers?'

Yet another corner and they were free of the cobbles,

out on to a broader street. There was no sign of pursuit. The car slowed down to a slightly less terrifying speed. ‘Not a word of Italian, didn’t you notice? They couldn’t; they were Juanese.’

‘Oh, Sari, nonsense! It was only because I was English.’

‘OK, nonsense. Then tell me, how did they know?—all that rot about the Sugar Princess?’

‘It’s your Juanese title. La Sacarissima—’

‘How did *they* know that? Antonio never mentioned it. He just said, “Principessa!” Who, outside San Juan, knows their ridiculous titles? La Bellissima—that’s the Grand Duchess. La Sacarissima—that’s the wife of the heir. A lot of made-up tommy rot, to impress the poor wretched Juanese plebs. But outside the island who knows it?’

‘You mean you realised from the first?’

‘Of course—well, from when we left the Piazza Pore Horse. So I thought we’d have a bit of fun. But first make sure of our get-away.’

‘By arranging with this Beppo—?’

They were across the river now, safe in the still busy streets of Rome. Sari spoke in Italian, the car slowed down to an acceptable speed. ‘Hasn’t he done a great job? I explained to him that we would need a quick get-away and of course for a car thief, that was money for jam.’ She spoke again in Italian, giving directions; fumbled in her handbag for a handful of notes. ‘Bravo, Beppo, molto bene!—grazie, grazie! And here we are,’ she said to Nan as they turned into the side street and drew up at the hotel, ‘so sucks to them! Buona notte, Beppo, e grazie, grazie!’ With a gay wave of the hand clutching the bundle of notes, Beppo in the bright green Lamborghini drove away. ‘Well, Nan—what a bit of fun?’

Nan got out of the car and went into the foyer. The

euphoria from the drink and hilarity had long drained away leaving her frightened and anxious. ‘But, how could they have known—?’

‘Ah,’ said Sari. ‘That’s it, isn’t it? Of course I always do go to the Piazza Navona to see my Pore Horse.’ And she asked at the desk, sharply, for their keys. ‘These are the right ones, are they?’

‘Of course,’ said the night duty Sardine, haughtily.

‘There *have* been mistakes,’ said Sari, sweetly. ‘Haven’t there?’ To Nan, as they fitted their keys into the doors of adjacent rooms, she added happily: ‘We got a jolly good dinner, after all, and it hasn’t cost us a farthing.’

‘You’re generally frightened,’ said Nan. ‘I mean about your Followers.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Sari. ‘I expect I shall be tomorrow.’ She added simply: ‘Thank God, tonight I’m drunk!’

Etho, having neatly disposed of Sari for the next couple of days, summoned a meeting of the inner circle of the Eight Best. ‘I’ll be slaving all day, but come round to my place about eight. I dare say we can rustle up a chicking sangwidge.’

The chicking sangwidge would in fact be a perfect meal rustled up by Etho’s perfect and rather charming housekeeper, known as the Troglodyte because she lived in the basement garden flat of his perfect little Georgian house in Hampstead. Etho was by now in the high echelons of Solon Pictures and could afford to do himself proud. Whether or not the charming housekeeper extended her duties beyond her care of his cuisine and possessions, was matter for the ceaseless gossip of his friends outside the Circle; within it, no one gave it a thought, or if they did, just hoped it was simply lovely for everyone concerned.

It was by no coincidence that they all lived fairly close to each other. Etho had found the flat for Sari, urging her over to England after the defection of Prince Aldo, and had similarly worked one of his magics to discover a small attic apartment for Sofa: she said ungratefully that it cost her two precious ounces every time she climbed all those stairs. Rufie picked her up in the Tootler and they drove over together. ‘My God, Etho!—not champagne?’

‘I thought we could all do with a drop,’ said Etho. He held up the bottle of Veuve Cliquot. ‘The Widow—God bless her many perfections!’

‘Fun without being boisterous—’

‘Entertaining without being over-powering—’

‘An excellent thing in a woman,’ said Sofy. ‘But rare.’

‘Full-bodied—’

‘Not so rare.’

‘—and yet delicate,’ said Etho. He looked at her with love. ‘Not to be roughly handled.’

‘That would be a rare thing too,’ said Sofy. She thought about it, sipping with deliberate appreciation at her champagne. ‘There’s a condition called *Adiposa Dolorosa*. I think it should be used more widely to embrace the situation of all large people. People think that if we are fat, that reduces us to a lot of punch-drunk bulls—or more usually cows—just there for the picadors to jab at with their witty banderillas.’

‘But you are your own picadors, my lovey dove. You make the jokes at your own expense.’

‘We are fending off the moment’, said Sofy, ‘when the matadors come along with their lunging swords, the ones that slay.’ But she shrugged off the moment of bitterness. ‘What’s this precisely in aid of, Etho?’

‘I thought we three really ought to talk things over; and

you can't with Sari around, not at times when we can all get together.'

'You did a great job of getting rid of her. I wonder how they're getting on?'

'The unfortunate Nan will be longing to Do Rome and Sari, from pure mischief, will be frustrating her at every point ...Even making the film, we had a job getting her to work in the Colosseum because of the Pore Cats, not to mention all the Pore Lions and Tigers that had suffered there in other days. Not a word about the Pore Christians and Gladiators... By the same token I dared not get foie gras, Sofy, in case you should ever let on and we'd all be in trouble about the Pore Geese. But my Trog looked up the richest pate she could find, absolutely bursting with Jersey cream, she assures me; and then a great hunk of the oiliest possible salmon and lashings of potato salad and mayonnaise...'

'Oh, you *are* too kind, darling. Do thank her from me.'

'She says she'll watch you next time on television and think to herself smugly, "I did that!"'

The Troglodyte had with her customary tact left everything ready and retired to her dungeon. 'Please God Sari doesn't take against Nan, Etho. I've often wondered... I mean, suppose there's a bit more to these visits than Luigi's attentions? and if she thinks Nan's getting over-curious...'

'The picture of poor Nan as a Follower, hand in glove with the Mafia Rossa—!'

'But Sari does rather readily drop people. I mean, even real, true members of the Eight Best, not just extras like Nan and Charley, however much we may love them. She walks such a tightrope of loves and hates. Dear old Jumbo with his great hooves or whatever elephants have, trampling in, trying to ask her what became of the ring—

‘And Willie. And Mary and The Mink—’

‘All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.’

‘Sari’s far less secure about herself than one imagines,’ said Etho, ‘from the way she carries on. She loves people so much and she works so hard to be loved, that if it fails, well, she takes it harder than the rest of us would, and she just gives up.’ He rose and picked up the bottle. ‘Let’s finish this with the pate and then we can get on to a little something that I’ve dredged up from the cellar, which, however, we won’t take into Sofy’s bull-ring of comparisons.’

‘If one had never been thin,’ said Sofy, following him, glass in hand. ‘But do you remember me in Rome? I was really a very pretty girl then, wasn’t I, Etho?’

‘As you are now,’ said Etho.

‘Well, but the wrong kind of prettiness. Can you see Aldo falling for me now? But he was mad keen then; only I ate such a lot of pasta and began this putting on weight, and as it suited the part, the studio encouraged me. To think that but for that, *I* might be the Sacarissima or whatever, by now, with the ring and Followers and a Mafia all of my own!’

‘That wasn’t the pasta, my love. That was just Sari. From the minute he set eyes on Sari—’

‘Well, it hasn’t done *her* much good, poor pet. But then, when did it ever? Every man she meets falls for her.’

‘She just isn’t an awfully good picker. And then they blot their copy-books and off they go ...Just a sec, we’ll get rid of these plates and then we must get down to the nitty gritty—’ Etho swapped the well-scraped pate dish for a vast platter of salmon and salad and sat down again ‘—and the nitty gritty begins with—what about this frightful Devigne of hers?’

‘The man at the tree or not at the tree?’ said Rufie. ‘And either way—murderer or not a murderer?’

‘One simply doesn’t see *how*.’

‘Or why,’ said Sofy.

‘She could be blackmailing him about this girlfriend business...’

The well-worn discussion lasted through the fish and into the profiteroles (‘She apologises for cream in two courses, Sofa, but I said you’d be only too thrilled’), ending up always on the note of terror: suppose he really is a murderer and she goes marrying him! And the alternative: if it wasn’t him—then who?

‘The Followers,’ insisted Rufie.

‘Darling, no one but you really believes in the Followers.’

‘We’ve got to believe in them, Sofy, after that letter with the seal.’

‘You *want* to believe in them, because it gets us all out of a jam.’

‘What do you mean, all of us?’ said Rufie, his white skin growing a little whiter as under stress it so easily did.

‘Well, Etho and I know what *we* were doing.’

‘I was here with Etho.’

‘And I was at home learning my lines, ha, ha!’

‘Come on, Sofy, don’t tease him,’ said Etho. ‘You and I were together, driving down to the cinema and back, and when I got home, Rufie came on over to hear all the gen.’

‘I don’t see why we don’t just say that. Why go pretending that we all stayed at home?’

‘First, because Sari tickly asked us not to go,’ said Etho, patiently. ‘And as far as the police are concerned, because it does leave Rufie with rather a wretched little alibi. So just say he came here earlier than he really did.’

‘Yes, well, it *is* a bit thin, Rufie darling. I mean, if by leaving the cinema early *we* could have got home by then—’

‘I didn’t go down to the cinema,’ said Rufie, angrily.

‘No, no, Rufie, no one believes you did. Do shut up, Sofa, and don’t be silly! You know and I know, that Rufie wasn’t with me till getting on for eleven; we also know that Rufie didn’t kill poor rotten Vi Feather, so we must all stick together and say you and I were at home and Rufie was with me lots of the time. I don’t think Vi saw me at the cinema but she saw you—which was stupid of you, darling, I can’t think why she didn’t mention it to Sari—’

(‘Pity she’s put on so much weight; I’d hardly have recognised her... Always on the telly nowadays, I’m told—can’t afford one, meself...’)

‘—but anyway, she can’t tell now. She’s dead.’

‘Yes, well, Rufie, sweetie, I didn’t mean to doubt you for a second. We must just all put our faith in the lovely Followers and be done with it.’

‘I thought you didn’t believe in the Followers,’ said Rufie, not entirely appeased.

‘Whether we do or not, they suit us all very well.’

‘But they’re true. The letter with the seal—’

‘Oh, you and your letter!’ said Sofy. ‘Aldo had that seal on a ring; he always wore it, but he was terribly careless with his things. Anyone could have picked it up and still have it. I wouldn’t put it past you, yourself, Rufie, to have used it—you’re always on the side of Sari’s Followers being real.’

Rufie went absolutely white. ‘What on God’s earth are you accusing me of now?’

‘I’m not accusing you, darling. I only say, you could have done it and you might have done it, to persuade us all that they were true. You know what the betrothal ring was

like, you could have done the sketch and used the seal on the envelope and only pretended to have got it out of the letter-box...’

‘I never went near the letter-box! I never went *near* it. We heard someone outside the door, Sari was scared; and then she went and got the letter out of the box, I never went near it—’

‘All right, Rufie, Rufie, she’s only teasing you,’ said Etho, laughing. ‘Of course we know you didn’t fake the thing and the police know it too because Sari herself told them what happened and that it was she who collected the letter. And I must say, it’s all rather convincing, and certainly a help to all of us because while the police continue to believe in the Followers—rightly or wrongly, who am I to say?—we all know Sari’s a bit obsessed with them, but that may be because they’re sometimes really there—but while the police can’t be sure, then they can’t be sure they didn’t kill poor Vi and the whole miserable business will remain a mystery.’ And a miserable business it was indeed, he added, in his own cool, indolent way—positively and ap-solutely Sofa had not finished up the profiteroles...

12

NAN IN A PANIC RANG up Etho from Rome, the morning after the visit to Trastevere. The high, gay affectionate voice on the other end of the line, protesting. 'My darling, it's nine o'clock, it's *dawn!*'

'Etho, I'm so worried, this poor girl...'

So Etho went round to see Rufie. 'Nan makes it all sound very odd, but I think it's nonsense, don't you?'

'Them being Juanese and all that? They just spoke English,' suggested Rufie, shrugging, 'because Nan was English?'

'Nan says they knew her title, Sacarissima, though nobody'd ever mentioned it. But I daresay Antonio did, when the girls were in the loo. Nan falls for it every time; Sari was just pulling her leg.'

'They do seem to have been very curious about the ring —'

'Well, but Rufie, anyone would be.'

'I must say it's hilarious,' said Rufie, 'her telling them she'd given it to the Pope!'

'It's too much association with you and Pony. Or has even the Pope gone ecumenically gay?'

Rufie burst into laughter. 'All the same, they do wear huge great rings, for people to kiss and what-not.'

'Gay or not, I don't think the Pope would be seen dead with this one; it must look like a bag of fruit gums by the time they've got it all slotted up together. I must say I'd love to see the Grand Duke's face,' said Etho, 'when his minions race back with the news that the Juanese betrothal ring has been handed on as a presie to the Pope of Rome.'

‘All the same... I mean, that message, Etho, whatever you and Sofy may say, with the seal and all, I was actually here when it was put through the door. That was real enough; that’s the real seal...’

‘How could anyone in England have the Grand Duke’s seal? He presumably doesn’t just lend it around—’

‘I suppose he’d entrust it to whoever he’s got working for him over here; for exactly what it was, for verimisilitude.’

Etho tucked away verimisilitude at the back of his mind for the delectation of Sari when she should come home. ‘Well, anyway, I told Nan to stick with her, not let her out of her sight and report back any more nonsense. She’s OK for this morning, at Luigi’s for the second application—surely no one will leap in and abduct her in the bedraggled nasturtium stage—’

‘But this afternoon—?’

‘Well, she says she’ll go moodling. Poor Nan longs for some sightseeing—one feels one can’t come away without just a *peek* at St Peter’s, she says, but Sari says no, no, nothing but all that awful barley sugar—’

‘What on earth does she mean?’

‘Well, come to think of it, the baldacchino with those spirally pillars does look a bit like barley sugar,’ said Etho, ‘but it’s only Sari being naughty. She always must be different, and poor old Nan, she’s just teasing her.’

‘A bit wicked, because after all, Nan’s paying.’

‘I know; but I did ask Nan if she wouldn’t mind too much, to give up the sights and stick with Sari.’

‘You don’t think she’s really in danger?’

‘I’d just like to know where she moodles *to*. I’ve promised Nan a huge great bag of barley sugar when she gets back, to make up...’

Nan had been not greatly mollified by the promise of the bag of barley sugar. Her telephone call had left her by no means entirely comfortable. One minute it was all nonsense, the next Sari was not to be left to run into danger alone. And who was to run into possible danger with her...? But after all, she thought, reproaching herself, one must pay some small price for being one of Them: for learning to giggle over Bernini bronze barley sugar, to ignore his fountains in favour of an emaciated nag, to recognise more charm in a rough-house in the slums than in all the elegant ristorante along the Via Veneto. And let's face it, she thought, I had more fun last night, just in one evening, than in all the trips put together, with poor Bertrand... She duly announced that she would abandon the tourism for that afternoon and go moodling with Sari.

They were waiting in the lobby of the hotel; Sari had put through a call to Phin who, by arrangement, would be alone in his consulting room, waiting to hear from her. Luigi had excelled himself and the hair now glowed like sunshine on a bed of wallflowers. But beneath the glow, the lovely face grew shadowed. 'No, no, darling, I couldn't bear it! Leave Rome tomorrow without seeing St Peter's and the lovely Vatican, tramp, tramp, tramp along those miles of corridors, all those surprisingly naked gentlemen's statues, and for all you know the Pope just waiting there to spring out upon you in biblical breeches of his own—'

'—and wearing the Juanese ring?'

But you couldn't catch Sari. 'Oh, that was only to tease those fearful Pietros and Whosits.'

'Do you really think they were Juanese?'

'Yes, of course they were Juanese. I told you.' She shrugged. 'Oh, well—the dear old syndrome again, Sari's making it all up! All of you, *all* of you, just because it

doesn't fit in with your narrow little parochial minds—'

'It's only that the whole thing's so fantastic...'

'So was Vi Feather's death fantastic,' said Sari. 'But perhaps none of you believe in that either?'

'Oh, sweetie, don't be cross!'

'I'm not cross,' said Sari. She added: 'Only in despair.'

'All the more reason for me to come with you and look after you.'

Sari's mind darkened as, beneath the flame of hair, her very skin had seemed to darken. Acutely perceptive, she knew at once that Nan was not just idly going along with her. She thought: she's following me. Never far from her mind was the dread of the Followers; and now... Here was Nan, wriggling on the hook, trying to make some excuses for forcing these attentions upon her. She said, slowly: 'Where I'm going is—sort of private.'

'Yes, but... I don't want to pry, darling, I'll just wait around, do whatever you say.' She pleaded: 'I did promise them all at home to look after you.'

'Where I'm going, I'll be safe enough.'

('I just want to know where she moodles to,' Etho had said on the 'phone, and seemed really earnest about it.) 'Let me come along and then I can do a church or something, while you go to wherever it is?'

If I don't let her come, thought Sari, she'll follow me. And the very thought of being followed turned her heart sick and cold; better to drag the intruder along, let her make what she would of one's secrets. 'All right,' she said. 'But it's very dull. It's only a convent; well, sort of a convent, it's a hospital really- miles out of Rome, out towards Tarquinia...' But there came the ringing of a telephone bell, she leapt to her feet, a Sardine wordlessly indicated a telephone booth and she ran off and closed herself in. 'My darling, my

darling...' Nan saw, through the glass, how the cloud passed, the whole lovely face lighted up...

She came out, radiant. 'One thing at any rate is safe,' she said. A self-drive car had been ordered and they drove out of Rome and into the country, Sari at the wheel. 'This is such a lovely place, Nan, where we're going. The nuns are such angels. They were very good to me once...' She thought over it, came to a decision. 'You see—everyone was so angry because I didn't properly finish the film, but the truth was that I couldn't. Aldo—he walked out on me, you know. After we were married—well, Phin has explained to me now the sort of person Aldo was. A psychopathic personality, no real love in him and no kindness; Phin's ex. is the same. At any rate—I became—well, ill; it was Aldo's fault, but that meant nothing to him and the moment real trouble arose, he just walked out. None of which would have done much good to my so-called image, that they were all so keen on; and certainly nothing I could be particularly proud of.'

'I see,' said Nan, slowly; and indeed, slowly, a new and unlovely dawn was breaking. The regular visits to Luigi for an out-of-date hair-do which anyway any salon in Mayfair might have accomplished. An illness of which one could hardly be proud; which had been Aldo's fault but still had driven Aldo precipitately away. 'Oh, well, never mind, darling,' said Nan, very easy-going and worldly-wise, 'these things can happen and after all you were married to him. And you're quite OK now? You just come back for check-ups?'

Sari gave her a slightly quizzical look. 'Well, you could say that, yes; I come back for check-ups.' She added: 'But not a word of all this to anyone, Nan, you swear? Even Etho doesn't know.'

'No, no, Sari, as if I ever would!' She suggested

delicately, 'You won't want me to come in with you?' After all, once behind convent walls, Sari must be safe enough from whatever lurking terrors Etho feared for her. 'Is there somewhere that I can wait?'

'Oh, yes, a heavenly little church in the village. The frescoes are famous for being the most hideous in Italy, people come from the ends of the earth. And the cemetery! —it's divine, all these wreaths made out of coloured beads and the poor dead people's photographs in little mosaic frames in the middle, and I must say more hideous people must have lived in this village than anywhere else in the world. Even the kiddywinx seem to have been ap-solute monsters, poor little creatures, and one does wonder whether their relatives may not have had the same idea and kind of edged them off a bit, I've never *seen* so many early die-ers in any churchyard.' They had climbed to a dusty hill-top village, its small grey church and walled graveyard dwarfed by the long white walls of the hospital buildings, set about with parched gardens punctuated by exclamation points of poplar trees. In the wide gravelled space before the tall front door, Sari stopped the car. 'I'll meet you here at five, outside the door, OK?'

'At five?' Nan looked with dismay at the available entertainment for a two-hour wait. 'Will it take all that time?'

'Well then, why did you come?' said Sari, bursting out with it almost savagely. 'I didn't ask you to, God knows.' But she got herself back under control. 'I'm sorry; only it does take a while, I thought you realised. I have to—see the doctor, like you said; and then visit all my chums, the nuns and the priests, they're all friends of mine, and some of the patients I knew are still here. And the children!—well, all hoppity, you know, I mean lame or blind or two heads, that

kind of thing, and pretty loopy, most of them.' She sat again for a moment musing, in the stationary car, her narrow hands gripping the wheel. 'Nan—never tell anyone. I've trusted you in bringing you here. Whatever you may think or guess at—never tell anyone. You swear?'

'Of course I won't, darling,' said Nan wretchedly, for to whom must she now be a traitor—to Etho who had entrusted Sari to her care, or to Sari who was putting her faith in her?

'So, all right. There's a caff of sorts, you'll be ever so comfy. But you *must* do the church, top on the list of horror-tourism. Put up a candle for me.' She got out and walked off to the door, the glowing golden hair, the brilliant colours of the reconstructed kaftan over the bright pink pants, swinging the inevitable huge painted canvas bag; looked back and called, 'And one for my Pore Horse. A special candle for my Pore Horse, love, you won't forget?'

Dear Sari—sweet Sari—maddening and yet so much loving, so compassionate Sari, with her outgoing heart! To whom must one be a traitor?—to those who loved and were anxious over her, or to Sari herself, perhaps at her own expense. Life with Bertrand had prepared Nan very little for such eventualities.

The frescoes were after all only rather amateurish and dull and the cemetery offered no more than a modicum of absurdity so touched with pathos as to be not really all that amusing. But as she wandered about the special part set aside, it seemed, for the 'early die-ers', there was a creaking of the gate of rusty scrolled iron-work and she saw that she was no longer alone. A woman had come into the graveyard and stood in the gateway looking about her as though she were a stranger there.

Very beautiful. In her early forties, perhaps: slender as

a willow, dressed in a perfection of countrified wear reminiscent of Marie Antoinette playing milkmaids at the Trianon. She too seemed more interested in the side of the churchyard reserved for children, bending down to look close at the pitiful photographs, walking the length of the wall with its indentations of small niches for the pictures, the little flower vases, too many now empty for years. She came close at last to Nan and said, her English fluent if not perfect, but with a delicious French accent: ‘Madame—excuse me. Do you understand how is this wall?’

‘I think they build them to take the coffins, don’t they? Like—well, like pushing them head first into drawers or something. And then they’re sealed off and the ledges are left for flowers and things.’ Poor little coffined bodies, stacked in their orderly rows, beside one another, above, below. The woman said pityingly: ‘It is sad to see so many little ones?’

‘Well, with this great hospital here ...And I think they take a lot of children, crippled...’ Pretty loopy, most of them, Sari had said, in that off-hand way of hers that must never deceive one into supposing that she spoke without feeling. ‘So I daresay they do get a lot of deaths. But I don’t really know much about it, I’m just waiting for a friend.’

‘I also. Will your friend be a long time?’ The sun beat down on the little grey enclosed place with its clutter of great beaded wreaths which the Eight would have found so hilarious but to Nan seemed only depressing, too many of them long neglected since those who had with such munificence placed them there had ceased to remember and care. She said: ‘I have to wait till five. But it’s dreadfully hot. I believe there’s a cafe somewhere...’

‘Will you accept to have a cup of coffee with me? It must be better than wandering here?’

But the cafe was closed: in the afternoon sun the village was taking its siesta, not a soul in sight. Across the square from the hired car stood a glistening black limousine, whose chauffeur and another man leapt out as, with her companion, Nan approached, but were motioned back again. ‘We could wait in my car but it will be—*etouffant*—I don’t remember how you say in English that there is no air? You think we might ask in the convent—?’

‘Oh—well—I don’t think *I’d* better,’ said Nan, a trifle alarmed. ‘My friend—well—she’s here on private business...’

‘Private business?—in a convent?’ said the woman, with a little *moue*, half protesting, amused. ‘I think a convent doesn’t hold so many guilty secrets?’

‘A hospital may,’ said Nan; but everything she uttered began to sound equivocal and she wondered uneasily how much Sari would care for this acquaintance suddenly blown up with a stranger—and a stranger so curiously unlikely, now one came to think of it, to be encountered at this particular spot: and yet not easily to be shaken off. She suggested, ‘There’s a little sort of garden over there, with a bench, rather nice and shady’—and nice and private too, she did not add—‘where we could sit under the trees.’ And as they sat down, afraid of being led into further possible misunderstandings, she apologised: ‘I’m so hot and weary; I think I’ll let myself have a little doze.’

‘But assuredly, Madam. Do not let me incommod you.’ But it was not to be as easy as that. ‘If your friend should come out—will she not wonder where you are waiting? We can’t be seen here, from the front door. She will be perhaps anxious and if she has been to the hospital for—because of illness—?’

‘No, no, she’s just—well, just visiting, I think,’ said Nan, vaguely. But she wouldn’t let herself actually sleep, she said,

just doze but keep her eyes on the time.

‘I will awake you if I hear the big door open. What does she look like, that I may recognise her?’

‘Well, she’s—I’m so sorry,’ said Nan, letting her head fall forward, ‘I really can’t keep my eyes open...’ Perfectly innocent questions; and yet... With Sari so paranoid about everything... ‘Do excuse me! I’ll just doze off...’

It was terribly uncomfortable but at least silence reigned. It was broken by a small gasp from the woman at her side. Nan’s eyes flew open. ‘Oh, my *God!*’ she said.

Far down the long white side wall of the building, a door had opened and Sari came down the few steps to the gravelled path. There was a nun with her, and a priest. And —a child.

They stood for a little while, talking. Between the two darkly-covered heads, the black biretta and the heavy veil, the bright hair shone, burnished in the afternoon sun; flanked by the two dark habits, the flamingo pink pants, the floppety tunic flamed brilliant as tropical flowers. One hand held tight to the hand of the little boy: for the child was a cripple.

A cripple and more than that. If the small pale face bore signs of physical suffering, it bore no other sign. The great dark eyes stared only vacantly up at the brightness above him. The little hand clung only from the need of physical support.

One small hand clinging. Under the other arm, he clutched tightly the bright blue wiggy-pig.

Sari glanced down at her wrist-watch, was suddenly in a hurry to make her farewells. The regulation convent kisses, cheek banged against cheekbone on either side; a tiny reverential bob sketched to the priest who, however, took

her by the shoulders, passed a hand as though lovingly across the glowing crop of soft hair, made with his thumb on her forehead the sign of the cross. She knelt down by the child and put her arms around him. Unsteadied, the little boy tottered and crumpled, and burst into resentful tears, hitting out at the bright visitor with vicious small fists. She endured it, turning to the nun for assistance, handing the child over to her care; and came away at last, walking with bent head slowly along the path to where it emerged into the gravelled drive before the big front door.

And looked up and saw Nan and Nan's companion, went absolutely ashen white and began to run.

They came to the car. Nan scrambled in after her. Sari swung the steering-wheel, tyres skidded and scraped, for a moment the world was filled with a nightmare of a thousand tiny sounds as dry gravel hit the bodywork of the car and fell away; and they were on to the cobbles of the village and belting through its narrow streets and out again into the countryside. Nan clung to the nearest handle as they jerked and bucketed their way along. She saw Sari glance into the driving mirror, turn round to look back through the rear window. The car slowed down to a more reasonable pace. She implored: 'Sari, what's the matter? What's this all about?'

'Nothing, nothing,' said Sari, her eyes on the road. 'I'm always upset when I go there.'

'It's nothing to do with that woman? I wasn't talking to her, I didn't tell her anything.'

'No, no,' said Sari. 'It's quite all right.'

'I just met her accidentally. She was in the cemetery too.'

'Oh, yes,' said Sari, ever staring straight ahead. 'The

cemetery.' She quoted: 'The grave's a fine and private place...'

'What ever do you mean, Sari?'

'Never mind. Just making jokes to myself, while I still can.'

'My dear, I hope you don't think—'

'Nan, for God's sake!' said Sari. 'Just leave me alone. I've got a headache like all hell. Simply don't talk to me.'

Silence, then. Back in the hotel, silently to their rooms presumably to meet later for the evening meal.

But when Nan emerged, bathed and changed, praying only to know how now to conduct herself—Sari's room was empty, Sari had gone.

The Sardines, in their scanty English, yielded reluctant information. The Signora had come down almost immediately and hurried out of the hotel; yes, she had carried her bag, the large canvas bag, the Signora always carried such a bag and never any other luggage. Soon after, she had come back and this time a man had been with her, who held her by the arm and, so holding her, brought her to the desk, demanded her bill and continued to hold her while she handed over the money, looking about him meanwhile, somewhat—furtively; and then gone out with her again. No, she had said nothing, not spoken at all. As to whether she had looked pale, ill, whether or not she had seemed to go willingly with the man, they shrugged oily shoulders. The hotel had been paid, suggested the shrug, and, unregretted, another guest had departed from their inhospitable doors. That was all they cared about.

Nan flew to the telephone but evidently Etho was not at home; nor was there any reply from Rufie. She dared not leave the hotel in case Sari returned or even rang up. The

Sardines were so uncooperative, no help there. She sat scared and bewildered in the lobby, not knowing what to do. The police? But a pretty young woman had simply left the hotel and gone off with a man, and wherever she turned she was hamstrung by her lack of Italian and inability to recount anything but the broad facts. And she felt herself hedged in with small, frightening mysteries. What had so much terrified Sari up at the hospital? True, she, Nan had seen much that she had not been intended to see: she recalled Sari's insistence that their rendezvous should be at the front door—and that she herself had come out through a side door, out of sight of the main entrance. And there had been the strange woman; a strange woman, indeed, to have been encountered in that place—with her cobweb of delicate, innocent-sounding questioning. She recalled now that the woman had spoken to her directly in English; had not paused to assume that she might be of any other nationality. A Follower?—entering the walled cemetery, knowing that Nan was there, forcing a conversation with her not very necessary question about the wall. But then—this elegant Frenchwoman, one of Sari's 'Followers'? And Sari had said nothing of their destination until they were in the hall, summoning the hire car—how could anyone have known of it? Spies?—were there spies right here in the lobby of the Sardines' hotel in the heart of Rome? She looked uneasily over her shoulder... Of course Sari was obsessed with this idea of being followed, her friends laughed the whole thing off, she was always trying to make herself interesting... Or they used to laugh it off; but now Vi Feather was dead.

Vi Feather was dead. Was dead, was murdered. And no one laughed so light-heartedly any more when Sari described how a car had followed her through the night of

storm; and laughed not at all when Sari said that Vi Feather had been murdered in mistake for herself.

If the Frenchwoman had indeed been spying upon Sari, trying to learn the secrets of the convent hospital? 'Swear you won't tell anyone,' Sari had said to Nan. 'Whatever you may think.' Sari had not wanted to take Nan there; unable to refuse without seeming to make the visit of too much importance, had been edgy and irritable. 'God knows *I* didn't ask you to come!' she had burst out, and had made Nan swear to tell nothing, to say nothing, whatever she thought or guessed, to say nothing to anyone. Had offered a few vague, placatory confidences. She had failed to complete her work on the film, not because she would not but because she could not. She had been 'ill'; the nuns had been terribly good to her, she had been ill—and it had been Aldo's fault but 'the moment real trouble arose' he had simply walked out on her... 'I see,' Nan had said; and suggested, all easy tolerance, 'So you come back for check-ups?' She remembered the small, quizzical glance with which Sari had answered. 'Well, yes, for check-ups. You could say that.' And the penny dropped at last. Yes, on the ludicrous excuse about Luigi and the hair-do, Sari came back regularly to Rome for check-ups; but it was she who did the checking up.

A small boy—to whom, with elaborate lies and excuses, Sari had brought the cherished blue pottery pig—a boy crippled and mentally defective. Child of Prince Aldo of San Juan el Priata; and his legal heir.

She sat absolutely stunned; and her first thought was—Who else knows? Did her friends know?—did the Eight know? But they didn't, Nan felt sure of it. 'Not a word of this to anyone, Nan, you swear? Even Etho doesn't know.' So who

did know?

Had Vi Feather known? She had been a dresser in the studio, she had worked closely with Sari; had Vi known? But Vi's mouth had been closed for ever. What Vi had known she could never now tell; and who else knew?

Well, now *she* knew. Nan knew.

She crept to the telephone again and this time Etho was there. But what to say? How much to tell? Were spies all around her in that suddenly lonely place? 'Etho—Sari's gone, she's disappeared. You haven't heard—?'

'Disappeared?' said Etho. 'Oh, my God!' He said almost angrily, 'I did beg you to look after her.'

'Well, I couldn't attach her with a ball and chain,' said Nan, driven by jittering nerves to irritability. 'She went off with some man—'

'Went off with a man?'

'Well, in fact some man went off with *her*.'

He seemed to cool down into his own old casual way. 'Oh, well, men are always going off with Sari.'

'This isn't... You always make light of everything.'

'Yes, well... It's all another nonsense, ducky, I expect, like your Juanese chums in Trastevere last night.'

'It's not nonsense.' said Nan, almost weeping. 'It's not nonsense.' She took a resolution. 'Anyway, Etho, I'm coming home. I can't do any good out here, I don't know who to turn to, I can't speak the language and what's more it's all too dangerous—there's a lot more to it than you think, Etho, you all turn it into silliness and laughing, but it isn't really funny and I'm frightened, and first thing tomorrow, Sari or no Sari, I'm getting the first flight out and coming home.' She slammed down the receiver and when almost immediately the 'phone rang back, refused to answer it. They're all very sweet and charming and funny, she

thought, but after all, what are they to me?—why should I risk my life for them, why should I end up in the back of some car like poor wretched Vi Feather? And she thought with a small blaze of resentment that, for the few brief months she had known them, she was now and would be perhaps for the rest of her life, a frightened woman; scared to go to bed, scared to close her eyes and sleep—I shall have to sit up all tonight and creep out in the morning and get out of this horrible country as soon as I can... And she found only little room in her terrified heart to pray that Sari would come back safe at last: that all would yet be well with her. What are they all to *me*?

But she did not come back; and next morning, sick with dread, Nan found herself a taxi—not the first that offered nor the second, but one chosen at random in another street —she began, as she humped her heavy suitcase, to recognise something of the strain under which Sari must have lived all these years—and got to the airport safely and aboard a plane. She would wash her hands for ever—please God!—of the Eight Best Friends. And if the air hostess comes round offering barley sugar for the takeoff, she thought, I shall be sick. Flying off from the most wonderful city in the world, without having glimpsed even one of its most beautiful sights—because, forsooth, dear Sari must, as Etho himself had said, ‘be different’—must reject, thought Nan, whipping herself up to an easy resentment, all that was ordinarily acceptable, all that was rational, made sense; must live in a state of inconsequential nonsense regardless of the feelings and wishes of her companions; dye her hair orange and affect not to know that she was stared at, array herself in bright patterned tops and painted pants, tie golden scarves over her head with pencilled partings, ruining an expensive thing for a single occasion... It’s all stupid and deliberate

and entirely self-conscious, thought Nan, savagely obliterating memories of innocence and gaiety that Sari had carried with her always outrageous or not; they were all just silly, affected bores; and buns and shoppings and slippery elm and the lot, her own old friends, and Bertrand's, were best in the end...

And yet again... Trips to the picture galleries with other mildly 'cultured' widows, little dinners with older married couples who had scraped the bottom of the barrel for 'a man to make up a four', afternoons of bridge, solitary evenings of television looking at the 'better' programmes so as to have 'a talking point' at the careful foursome dinners—nowadays, none of it seemed what Rufie would have called the most rivvy of pastimes. Ap-solutely not. I dare say, she thought to herself, crushing down rueful longings, I shall go beresk with boredom. But in the end, they'd been right, Mavis and Lillian and all of them. It was all too frightening, too bewildering; she would harden her mind against the magic circle and know them no more.

Yet as she came at last to the warm safety of her Hampstead flat with its nice safe colours and its nice deep sofas and its nice, familiar porters downstairs, protecting her—something of the terror fled. It was all too bizarre and ridiculous—she had been brain-washed into accepting the self-dramatisation and silly games; but going through to the kitching to make herself a chicking sangwide, an old depression closed in; and she thought with a sore heart, Oh, Sari, where are you now, are you safe, ought I to have stayed and found you? and what will you think of me, what will they all think of me, for having abandoned you and left you there alone?

Sari waited until Nan had departed down the gangway and

then got off the same plane, found a taxi and made her way straight home. Sergeant Ellis waited until they had both gone and then also alighted, found a police car and made his way straight to Chief Superintendent Charlesworth.

Rufie was in the flat alone, Pony having tactfully taken his departure before her return. 'So now tell, my dove-y-darling, what is it all about?'

She sat curled up on the couch, towelled down after the great, deep, reviving, scented bath, wrapped in a dressing-gown, sipping at hot black coffee. 'I wasn't going to spend another night in the hotel with that one! All the time, Rufie, she's been a traitor, she's one of Them. I don't just think. I know.'

'Something's happened, Sari, hasn't it?'

'Yes, well it has but I'll wait till I see Etho, I'll tell you the whole thing after that. But Nan's in it, up to the ears. I mean—even that business about Trastevere—who could have told those creatures, how could they have known I'd be at the Piazza Navona?'

'You always do go there, darling, when you're in Rome.'

'Yes, but surely they're not crouching there all through the year watching my Pore Horse, like big game hunters in a machan or whatever it's called, sitting over pore goats? And then, up at the convent...' She was silent.

'The Something was at the convent, Sari?'

'*Somebody* was at the convent. And how could anyone have known I was going there? Only Nan could have told; made a sign, some sort of message, I don't know what. So the moment I got back to the hotel with her, I just crept out again.' She looked ill, dreadfully pale, her fists were clenched tight. 'Rufie, I'm afraid of her now, I'm afraid of everything.'

‘She rang up Etho in a terrible state about you.’

‘All a pretence. She does a good job, give her that. But anyway, I wasn’t taking any more chances.’ She broke off. ‘Oh, Rufie, sorry darling, but the quickest wee in the world, all that coffee, I simply must.’

Rufie took advantage of the wee, to make a dash for the telephone and beg Etho to come round as soon as he could. ‘I do think something bad has happened, she’s genuinely scared.’ He was sitting innocently back on the long sofa when Sari returned and curled up there next to him, reaching out a long arm for the inevitable cigarette. ‘So tell, Sari—no money left by then, surely, so how did you make the get-away?’

‘Oh, well that—yes, sheer inspiration.’ At thought of it, her spirits began to rise, the colour came back to her cheeks, a spark of hilarity. ‘I had to pay my bill, I wasn’t going to be beholden to her. Benediction was wailing away in the next door church and I thought to myself surely no Juanese in a church? They pretend to be Roman Catholics but they’re not really, no Apostolic Succession and all that jazz, they just create their own bishops and things and get on with it. The only Catholic on the island, if she is one, would be the Grand Duchess.’ A shadow darkened her face. She said: ‘She’s not Juanese. She’s French.’

The door of the flat was never locked; you simply pushed it open and came in. Sofy came in now, warned by Etho that there were breakers ahead. She had supposed it would be something to do with Phin but no, something had happened in Rome, it seemed, that had put even Phin into the background of Sari’s mind. Nan had come home after some rumpus or other, alone; Etho would be along as soon as he could... While Rufie made more coffee, (‘And biscuits, Rufie,

I still need a pound and a half), the gist of Nan's offences was gone over again, and a potted account of the get-away, as far as it had been narrated. 'So you went into this church?' prompted Rufie, yielding his place on the couch to Sofy and himself sinking into the bag of beans. 'Sari says they're not really proper Catholics on San Juan el Pirata; only the Grand Duchess is, because she's French.'

'Oh, is she?' said Sofy, innocent of overtones.

'Yes, she is, she's a Parisienne. Aldo's father saw her there,' said Sari, 'and simply took one look, marched up to her father and said he was going to marry her and the poor man was apparently so scared that he simply said yes, yes, of course, of course. The Grand Duke is about nine foot high and terrifying—Aldo's petrified of him; in fact that was a lot of the trouble. But anyway, the Duchess—very beautiful she is, Aldo showed me thousands of pictures of her.' She paused. 'I'd know her anywhere.'

'Yes, well, about the get-away, then?'

'Oh, yes. Well. Well, so I went into this church and searched round for a suitable-looking man and knelt down beside him and what is known as burst into highly becoming tears, and asked him to help me. So of course the Latin Lover leapt to it and I told him the tale about my cruel husband—he went a bit pale so I assured him, perfectly harmless to everyone except me—and he crept into the hotel with me and paid my bill and out we came into the street, all before he had time to think; where to his great surprise I dragged him into a taxi, briskly took down his address and promised to send him the money; and told the man to drive out to Fiumicino, fast, kindly offering to drop my chum off anywhere he cared to be taken to. Miles out of my way, wouldn't you know? Hardly a lira left when I'd paid.'

Rufie, too familiar with Sari's improvisations to see anything very extraordinary about this *histoire*, poured more coffee for Sofy and asked, where, then she had spent the night.

'Well that was it, wasn't it? Of course she'd paid for everything up to that, except for my Pore Horse and I did insist on doing Luigi, out of the wiggy-bank. So I thought, well, an airport at night would probably be safe because this time really nobody could have known where I was going, not even rotten, spying Nan. And so it was, because—'

'Don't tell us,' said Sofy—'you met a lovely man?'

'Yes, in fact I did, and he let me creep into his office which was closing for the night, and sleep on the bench in there; and turned up next morning with coffee and the sondveedge; and all with no strings attached...'

'There never are any strings in Italy,' said Sofy. 'That's what's so wonderful, talk talk, pinch pinch, bottom black and blue, do I not know, because they do so love a large blonde; but if you show the slightest glimmer of being ready for more, they scarper. Wives and six kiddywinx at home and as long as you pick on a married one, you're safe.'

And fortunately, said Sari, as though this were merely a useful fact to have by one through life, continental men did wear those huge wedding rings...

'But poor Nan, darling, finding you suddenly so inexplicably vanished!'

'Not so jolly inexplicably; *she* knew. And not poor Nan at all. Rufie won't believe, Sofy, that Nan's been spying on us all this time. But I know. I mean, like I've said, what do we know about her?—Etho picked her up at this party, she could have been placed there, primed with her one joke—God knows she's never made another. And very dreary in fact she is—'

‘Oh, Sari, you loved her!’

‘Not when I got her abroad; she drove me nearly mad. The complete and utter tourist, we’d have gone gooping round all day if she’d had her way, guide books at the ready, and dinner at seven in crummy little dives, everything no garlic for the Breteeesh and candle-wax running down the necks of Chianti bottles as though someone had been sick over them. Actually I was dying to go to dear old St Peter’s and pay my respects to M. Angelo —’

‘Oh, ducky, one does so agree,’ said Rufie, for a moment unwontedly camp. ‘All those muscular slaves struggling up out of their marble!’

‘Not St Peter’s, darling, actually; Florence. And much more like trying to get out of too-tight suspender belts, I always think—’

‘Which you wouldn’t know about, Rufie, of course. Unless any of the Visitors—’

‘But the lovely, lovely Pieta,’ interrupted Sari, a mite hurriedly; Rufie played it all very quietly, after all, and he didn’t take kindly to teasing. ‘And then dear St. Peter with his toes munched away by pilgrims, not that he’s by Michaelo; and—well, it’s all so huge and super. Only I simply couldn’t give in and be one of *her* and I’m afraid I did rather tease her. It was a shame really—’

‘—and after all, Sari, she was paying—’

‘—but she did get on my nerves. It’s the nippety way she eats. And now, of course, I’m glad. The whole thing, the whole of Nan, has been an act.’

The newly dyed hair stood up softly ‘en brosse’, like the hair of a marmalade cat; but Rufie, exchanging glances with Sofy, saw that beneath the whipped-up excitement the lovely face was strained and the gabble a little bit forced,

And one thing was certain; Sari loved or she loved not and if Nan had in some way offended—justifiably or not—from here on Nan was out.

13

A WEEK HAD PASSED since the discovery of the murder and Mr Charlesworth's collage was in a somewhat sorry condition, lots of little pieces of fur and feather all neatly fitting together but fitting with no other little fitted-together pieces; not to mention a huge assortment of other materials which might or might not have a place. And all against a background of almost farcical fantasy, true or false one quite honestly could not say. The Press were getting noisy, his seniors restive and as he sat, mentally tossing about the assorted contributions to his picture, as a child messes about the food on its plate, he found time to utter a short prayer that his sergeant would have something constructive to report, when he got back from Rome. Ginger had been only too delighted to go out and keep a discreet eye on the problematic doings of Miss Morne; having with customary complacency exhibited a fluency in Italian, the more impressive in that neither of them could recognise the accent as execrable. He appeared at last, looking exceedingly sheepish. Charlesworth said, 'Good God!—what on earth have you been doing to yourself?'

'All in the way of duty, sir,' said Ginger, manfully.

'To get yourself a Bubbles hair-cut—in the way of duty?'

'I thought I might get a bit of something out of this Luigi, sir; and before I knew it, they had me in a chair and were hopping around me like the Seven Dwarfs. His-and-Hers, sir.'

'But you seem to have got Hers. Well, I'm sorry, Ginger,' said Charlesworth, bursting into outright laughter

for the first time in quite a long while. 'I'll personally pay for you to go to the best barber in town and have something done about it!'

'But what's it going to look like, sir, on the expenses sheet? x-thousand lire for a short-back-and-sides at a His-and-Hers?'

'I'll look after it all for you. Now come on, for all this self-sacrifice, what've you got?'

'If I could put my cap back on, Mr Charlesworth, sir? I can't keep my mind on it, like this.'

'Of course, of course... Yes, well?'

'Well, I got an earlier plane, sir, got to the hotel address she gave you before *she* did, had a word with these so-called Sardines. Nasty little bunch, but one great advantage—for a couple of bob they'd sell their grandmothers.'

'So would I,' said Charlesworth, 'if anyone was ever so mad as to offer as much.'

'But *their* grandmothers are right on the spot, and working like demons—'

'So is mine—uninvited. And demons make very bad cooks. Though you'd think they'd be able to roast. Well—so?'

'So I gave them the couple of bob, but told them not to worry about the flag, as it were; and they undertook to spill every bean that came their way. They have no deep love for Miss Morne. It seems that she—'

'I know, don't tell me. Incited the other guests to tie up the shoe-laces of all the shoes left outside doors to be cleaned, in inextricable tangles of odd pairs—'

'They didn't mention that one. And come to think of it,' said Ginger, 'not a lot of men wear shoes with laces, these days.' He sighed. 'A lovely lady, you can't help sort of—well, loving her; but you can't believe a word she says.'

‘Or only one here and there,’ said Charlesworth. ‘That’s the worst of it; you don’t know which is true.’ It was like his collage; you couldn’t be sure which bits to take into account and which to leave alone.

‘Yeah well, so I took a room in the hotel, very cheap it is fortunately, and if they ever noticed me I don’t think they reckernised me—’

‘Not with that hair-do,’ said Charlesworth, laughing again.

‘I could put it down on the sheet as “Disguise”? suggested Ginger, hopefully. But anyway, he had watched them and a bit of a tricky business it had been, never drunk so many espressos in his life. If only they had gone to look at things, he added wistfully; for Ginger to be in Italy and deprived of its enchantments was a genuine regret. He described the visit to the Pore Horse, however, adding a few tributes to the Bernini fountain which Charlesworth, anxious to get down to the facts, hastily repressed; and the subsequent absurdities in Trastevere. ‘Lord knows what she was up to. She shushed them all into the restaurant and went running over to a group of men, holding out a great sheaf of notes, and had a gabble with them and then had a word with a policeman and went into the restaurant. I introduced myself to the policeman, not that he believed in me for a second, me in my civvies, but he told me just the same: she’d asked the men if they could arrange a car for her outside the restaurant later on and one of them had a green Lamborghini that he kept an eye on for some count or someone who had a flat there, which they all seem to do now, and sometimes drove for him; and he said he’d drive *them*, the count was away and he wouldn’t mind a bit. He couldn’t think why she kept addressing him as “Beppo”—he’d never set eyes on her before—but it really didn’t

matter. The policeman said he'd told her that it was all OK. So later when they came out the restaurant, she dragged Mrs Winter along with her and they madly drove off to the hotel. I waited and watched what the two men did—no use trying to catch up with the Lamborghini—and all they did was to go into hysterics wondering what it was all about and then calm down and get into a hire car they had waiting and meekly drive away. But what was going on, I had no idea, any more than they seemed to have.'

'Building up this thing about the Juan—all right, all right, Hoowarnese—followers?' suggested Charlesworth shrewdly. He thought it over. 'Would you recognise the Juanese dialect?'

'I'd reckernise straightforward Italian,' said Ginger, 'and that's what those two were talking.'

'Mrs Winter wouldn't know, either way?'

'They'd speak English with her there, I daresay?'

'M'm, well that's great, you did a good job on that. So then?'

'So then the next morning the two ladies went back to the hair-dresser's for the second stage of their treatments—'

'One stage had been enough for you?'

'Yes,' said Ginger, rather crossly. All this and raillery too?

'No one would believe it!'

'Nossir,' said Ginger.

'Come on, Ginger, come on—don't start your nonsenses! I'm sorry. What next?'

'Well, next, I hung about in the hall—more hand-outs and then the Sardines were letting me wear a porter's uniform cap and pretend to work behind the desk, more or less out of sight. So after lunch, they had a discussion in the hall and Mrs Winter was insisting on going with Miss Morne

to this convent. Then a call came through for Miss Morne and she went into a call-box, and the minute she'd gone, the Number one Sardine, knowing, I suppose, that Mrs Winter didn't speak Italian, and of course not knowing that I did—they spoke enough English for me to have got along with them, over all this—immediately snatched up the desk telephone and put through a call, and said in a low voice, "Signora Duchessa?" which means Madame the Duchess—'

'Thank you,' said Charlesworth.

'—and he rapidly explained that the young lady was going to the convent, and then, with a lot of pregos, that means—'

'Sergeant, I *have just* been outside England once or twice in my life.'

'Yessir, sorry sir—well, anyway, he then rang off. So off went the ladies, with me following them, to this convent—'

'Which convent, for goodness sake?' said Charlesworth, unwisely.

'A bit outside Tarquinia, sir, in the countryside. Very, very old village, church quattrocento, I wouldn't be surprised, and a walled graveyard, but frankly dreary frescoes. The convent must be nearly as old, with a chapel and a famous Madonna, painted marble, a thing you don't all that often see—'

'Or wish to hear about. What *happened?*'

'Well, I have to explain it, sir. The place is run by nuns, given over to care of the sick, a lot of cripples and mentally handicapped—that's why this Madonna is supposed to do miraculous cures, the Madonna day Marracalli they call her, that means—Yes, well, I'm just saying, the chapel's stiff with abandoned crutches, a pair of surgical corsets, sir, a bit hilarious, and offerings of course and what not—'

'Come on, Ginger, spare me, spare me: what

happened?’

Ginger favoured his chief with a you’ll-be-sorry look and in a rapid gabble recited the course of events. ‘—so then Miss Morne rushed off and drove away fast and the lady stood staring after her and when the car was gone, she turned and went quickly up the front steps and into the convent. So, the door being open, I just went in after her. She asked for the Mother Abbess and they said pronto, pronto—’

‘OK,’ said Charlesworth, dangerously.

‘—and while she waited she went into the chapel and knelt down to pray. I followed her in. That Madonna, sir!—it’s really pretty spectacular—’

‘But what *happened?*’

‘What actually happened, sir? Well, a message came and she went in to see the Mother Abbess. I waited till she came back into the hall—’

‘And then?’

‘And then went in to see the Mother Abbess,’ said Ginger sweetly.

Meanwhile, at the flat in Hampstead, Etho had arrived for a late lunch, and was highly entertained by the history of the Flight from Rome—‘Not that I believe a word of it: you just came downstairs before Nan did and paid your bill and went off to the airport...’

‘I went and got this man, you can ask the Sardines.’

‘The Sardines will say anything you ask them, for a couple of bob,’ said Etho, as Ginger had earlier that morning said to Charlesworth. ‘Never mind, it’s much more fun the way you tell it. But this business up at the convent...’

She had telephoned Phin and they were meeting that night, for dinner; she was aglow with happiness but beneath

it was a terrible fear. Her skin had the strangely dark look that it took when she was under great strain, not a greyness but a darkness, a darkening, not even physical perhaps, of the whole lovely face. She looked round at them. ‘You three —you’re the only ones in all the world that I can really trust; you three. You know me and you can understand me. You know what they think now isn’t true; but you know it’s what they’ll think.’

Etho sat on the couch, her hand held lightly and lovingly in his own. ‘They’ll think that four years ago you went into the hospital to have a child. They’ll think that that little boy—crippled and mentally defective—is Aldo’s legitimate heir. It’s as simple as that.’

‘Would it matter so very to them?’ said Sofy. ‘They seem to pretty well make up their own rules. I mean, didn’t the Grand Duke just write off the marriage by declaring it annulled?’

‘It was more complicated than that,’ said Etho. ‘They’d been married in Rome, a church wedding—’

‘But you’re not a Catholic, Sari?’

‘I just said I was,’ said Sari, shrugging. ‘It seemed easiest.’

‘—and the Grand Duchess, being a real Catholic, and very devout—well, she wouldn’t take that too lightly.’

‘It seems a curious way of getting out of it,’ suggested Sofy, ‘that this devout lady should prefer to lend herself to murder.’

‘I don’t suppose she’d know anything about murder,’ said Sari. ‘She’d simply report back to the Grand Duke. Of course Aldo will never have said a word about it, the whole thing was probably as much of a shock to her as *she* was to me.’

‘Then why should she be there? How could she know

where you'd be going?"

"They follow me anyway," said Sari, despairingly, "wherever I'm going."

"Dovey-darling—you simply contact them now and tell them it isn't true?"

"Why would they believe me?"

"The Reverend Mother there would tell them—"

"Why would they believe *her*? But anyway, the nuns don't know much about it. I used my stage name, they simply took me in, I was ill—"

"For all those months, Sari? It does take some explaining?"

"Not to you, Sofy, I hope?" said Sari, with ice in her voice.

"She was ill," said Etho. "Nobody could make out what was wrong, but she was ill, the studio told me to look after her, she was their property." And without Sari observing that he informed them, he informed them. "The studio knows there was never a question of any child."

"Well, can I ask you, Sari, without you freezing me to death—who *is* this particular child? I mean, why do you bother with him?"

"I bother with him because he's a poor, forlorn little orphan who was dumped on their doorstep about the time I first went there, and I got fond of him. And I—most astoundingly, I know, quite incredible, isn't it?—happen to still be sorry for him and try to be kind to him. If that makes him my child, I'd better not go round patting dogs any more; or maybe my Pore Horse—"

"Sari, Sari!" said Etho. His grip tightened on her hand. "Keep it cool, darling, nobody's doubting you, Sofy only wants to sort the thing out."

"She can sort it out for herself," said Sofy, resentfully.

She heaved herself up from her armchair. 'I've got to go, anyway, I've got a rehearsal.' Stage-trained, she moved her bulk smoothly and almost gracefully to the door. 'Well, goodbye Sari, and I hope you're in a slightly better temper next time I see you.'

Sari sat slumped on the couch. 'Oh, God!' She said, wretchedly: 'She might make a few allowances. It's bad enough without *her*.'

'She'll come round, Sari, never mind.'

'I don't mind,' said Sari, rousing herself. 'Let her go! She's probably a bloody traitor like all the rest of them.'

'Oh, darling, you know she isn't!'

'No, she isn't, she couldn't have known we were going to the convent, that was bloody Nan. Sent a message while I was fixing about the hire car...' She scrambled to her feet. 'She thinks the child was mine. She thought at first I was being treated for V.D., it was hilarious; but her face when she saw me standing there with the kid clutching my blue wiggy-pig—'

'You told us you'd broken the wiggy-pig.'

'Yes, well I didn't want everyone knowing I was going out to the convent, that's my own business, why should *she* know all about me? But he does love bright colours and I was so hard up, so I stuck the wiggy-pig in my safari-bag and just took him along. But she thinks she's got me now, she'll be on the blower to San Juan at this very minute, or to her precious Bellissima in Rome. Hiding away from me they were, in a little side garden, thinking I'd come out by the front door; and the funny part is, that I came out by the side door, trying to hide from Nan. She insisted on coming, it would have looked suspicious to refuse, and I thought I could fool her...'

'I've told you, Sari, I asked her to stick with you in case

you were in any trouble. It was perfectly innocent.'

'Yes, a lovely excuse—rang up and told you a lot of rubbish and scared you into asking her. She's no innocent, not dear Madame Winter, damn, sneaking traitor, with her spinach hair and her one single joke—'

'Spinach hair?'

'Well, I did let Luigi jazz her up a bit but actually it turned out rather well. Boring, but good, not like dear Nan herself, who's boring and bad.'

'Sari, of course she wasn't in league with them, how could she be?'

'Then who *was*? One of all of *you*? But you couldn't have known about the convent, nobody knew.' She disappeared into the bedroom. 'A quick wee, and then I'm going to see Nan and give her bloody hell.'

Nan in a very real anguish had called in a dear friend from the local church who had been what she whimsically called her Shoulder, at the time of Bertrand's death. The clergyman looked exceedingly alarmed at the appearance of the tall, slender figure in its close-fitting black coat, crowned with a garden Red Hot Poker of flaming hair. Etho followed her in, by no means very comfortable but with his customary detachment. Nan cried out: 'Oh, darling Sari!—you're safe?'

'Not with friends like *you* around,' said Sari.

'You misunderstood—'

'Yes, I did but I don't any longer. So you just get on the 'phone, you damn, traitorous bitch!—and ring up your precious employers and tell them what I tell you to say. Tell them—'

'Mrs Winter—I simply can't let you be spoken to like this.'

'You keep your damn clerical trap shut!' said Sari,

whipping herself up into royal rage. 'What business is it of yours? Or are you in it too, a nice hand-out from the Cattolica Rossa of San Juan to the dear C. of E.?'

'Sari, please!' implored Nan.

'Yes, well, *Nan* please! Please get on to the telephone if you can find it under whatever gruesome frilly taffeta telephone cosy it wears, and ring up your bloody Grand Duchess and tell her—'

'Sari, how can I ring up the Grand Duchess?—I didn't even know she *was* the Grand Duchess—'

'Then what where you doing sneaking around with her, how did she know I'd be there? You think that child was my child, don't you? You think I had the child in the convent hospital and left it there, walked out on it, just the sort of thing I *would* do, of course—'

'I had no idea why you'd been in the hospital—'

'No of course not, that's what you came to find out, you insisted on coming with me—'

'Etho asked me—'

But Sari swept on. '—and niggling on at me about why I'd been there. At first you thought I'd had V.D., didn't you? —a nice dose of the clap, that's what your lady-like little mind rose to, so charming! And so Christian!—me and my Shame and you so broad-minded and charitable, associating with the poor leper, looking down your damn superior, lady-like nose—'

'Miss Morne, I simply can't allow—'

'Shut *up*!' she said, turning upon him like a fishwife. 'Clear out, go and strangle yourself with your dog-collar! It's you that's made her what she is, blind to human weaknesses and human agonies, it's from you she gets these pretensions to charity. We were always hearing about your Beautiful Influence—toffee-nosed hypocrites that never knew a decent

temptation in the whole of your narrow little lives, condescending towards people a damn sight better with all their faults than you'll ever know how to be, because you simply have no idea what you're talking about... You're minuses, that's what you are, no plus, nothing, just minuses...' She swung back to Etho. 'It's no good, let's skip it, let's get out of this place. There's no use telling her; whatever's worst to believe about me, that she'll go on believing because this dog-collared he-goat here will tell her to. Come on—we're leaving!'

'And good riddance,' said the clergyman, very white, with shaking hands. 'You've been here quite long enough.'

'That's right: good riddance to the truth about yourselves for once. So come on Etho!—as he says, we have been here long enough: let's do a Cromwell and in the name of God—go!'

'I'm sorry,' said Etho to the trembling Nan. 'She knows it's not true, she knows you've done nothing, but she's been very badly shocked and she has to find somebody to blame.' Sari interrupted but he overrode her. 'There was nothing wrong about her being in the hospital, Nan, the child wasn't her child and you can take that from me. So now, just write us all off—'

'Indeed she will,' said the clergyman.

'Yes. I daresay in the end, poor dear,' said Etho, 'she's best with you. So, Nan, just—forget us. I'm sorry about all this. OK, Sari, come along!' But in the neat pinky painted corridor, walking down the stairs with their excellent carpet in a deeper shade of rose, he took her arm. 'Well, *not* very pretty, my love, was it? Or very kind. Still, I daresay you feel better.'

'They're so damn smug. Call themselves Christians!—what would Christ have thought of them?'

‘They believe they have the answer,’ he said mildly, ‘and they make no allowance for any other answers or for people to be free to choose their own answers for themselves. They’re perfectly nice people, just ordinary. Still, it won’t do them any harm to get a bit of a shake-up. Only don’t do it again, because if I saw too much of it, I might come to love you less.’

She climbed into the car beside him. ‘But you never will, Etho, will you? You never will?’ She folded her two hands round his upper arm and for a moment leant her bright head against his cheek. ‘I couldn’t manage without you, could I? You’ve always been there.’

‘And I’ll always be there. I know you, Sari, so I understand you best.’

‘And always love me?’

‘Yes, always. But just because I love you, don’t teach me not to like you.’ He gently released his arm, switched on the ignition and slowly drove out of the drive. She sat beside him, hugging the inevitable painted safari-bag on her knee. ‘When you say love me, Etho—do you mean love me? Or just—love me?’

He kept his eyes steadily on the road. ‘I mean just love you. You sort of—belong to me. It’s a little bit like you and that child—I care for you. You’d do anything for the child, to help it and protect it. And I’d do anything for you.’

‘Anything?’ she said, in a sort of wondering way.

‘You don’t face facts, Sari do you?’ he said. ‘Yes—anything.’ With no change in his voice, he added: ‘Like taking you home for a quick wee and a slow application of powders and paints and putting on your bestermost to meet your dear Phineas for dinner...’

‘And the whole weekend,’ said Sari, blissfully.

The weekend proved not an unqualified success. Ena Meena, introduced again to the bright stranger, grew suspicious and militant and when Phin accordingly removed his beloved, resented his absence from home. Nanny added lavishly to the telephone bill with calls to Mummy. Neither was best pleased: once Phin had acquired a respectable wife—even if she did look as though she wore her hair on fire—it was hard to see why the courts should ever remove her to the care of her mum, and Ena's blackmailing hold on Phin was gone. The only hope was to urge Ena Mee on to ever greater shows of grief and jealousy and this, without the smallest regard for the child's true feelings, both ladies proceeded ceaselessly to do. Phin, deeply in love, was nevertheless unable to conceal his anxiety; Sari, for all her happiness, in the depths of her soul was sick with many fears. And if she should lose this, the last ever, surely, hope for peace and happiness... Meanwhile...

To say that, on sight, Phin Devigne became a devoted admirer of his lady's little clique, would be to exaggerate. A party must be fixed for the Sunday evening, when he could meet them all; Sari in her happiness summoned back lapsed friends of days gone by - none that she had deliberately abandoned; with Sari, once you had betrayed her love for you, that was the end. But several were invited who, by forming outside relationships, had faded away; even the Ites as they were called by the circle, short for the Something-or-Otherites, they never could remember the name of the sect—somewhat sheepish in their saffron robes, with their shaven heads—whether male or female Phin could not be entirely sure—but anyway it appeared to make little difference in Sari's entourage. Sari was enchanted to see them, 'Oh, darlings, what heaven! Rufie hung about all day

in Oxford Street hoping you'd come hopping by. And your hair-do's!—sort of the opposite of tonsures, with the little pigtailed hanging down! And the tambourines!'

'Darling, stash them away somewhere for goodness' sake!—only don't let us forget them, it's as much as tomorrow's rice-ration is worth. My dear, the trouble getting away!'

'We had to sing plans to each other as we skipped along.'

'She's supposed to be in St George's Hospital with a suspect ankle, hopped off the pavement by mistake. At this very minute, for a bet, Hyde Park Corner's a bedlam of goodwill rattling and chanting.'

'How can you endure it?'

'Well, they're lovely people and, like I say, there's the rice-ration.'

'I most specifically said to Sofa, no risotto or paella.' For Sofy was back with mutual apologies and busy in the kitchen, 'So lucky for all of you, because no one else can get in to help, so I can't complain,' and meanwhile more and more guests arrived to be crossed off mentally by civilly smiling Phin from any guest list of his own, once he got his bride safely home. It could be of little comfort that Sari should confide to him that all the girls were going beresk about him—('Berserk, darling,' corrected Phin, automatically)—and in fact everyone thought he was absolutely fabulous. And they were extraordinarily charming to him, replacing one another on the couch beside him to say how wonderful it all was, how happy it would all be, and over and over again what a terribly special, marvellous lady he had got, so lovely and beautiful and funny, and so sweet and kind, so loving and giving... Phin glanced down rather wretchedly at the offering of her love which indeed

suggested a very madness of generosity—so much tortured gold must have cost the earth and already he was planning the double life it must lead, displayed at home on his little finger in all its barbaric glory, slipped into his pocket before patients and staff could catch any glimpse of it. As to its cost, he need not have worried; though she did not tell *him*, Sari had confided to her intimates the by no means unusual story of how a lovely gentleman in the shop, in this case a gentleman of Arabic origin, had seen with what reluctance she refused the purchase and hurried after her, begging, with many assertions of total disinterestedness, to allow him to give it to her. To him the money meant nothing, and after just one smile on that—forgive me, most beautiful lady, please understand!—on that wonderful face, he would disappear from her life. She always did with perfect simplicity accept, and in fact they always did keep to their promise. But instinct told her at least that Phineas Devigne, Esq. F.R.C.S. would not look upon this as the most acceptable way of acquiring a betrothal ring.

A betrothal ring. Why had she given Phin a betrothal ring when the very words stirred her heart to a panic of fear? As, by curious leaps and bounds of time, the meal progressed ('Oh, darlings, I *am* so sorry but it's your fault, you wouldn't be ready, and now it's gone as flat as a pancake...') she muttered to Rufie, 'Where's Pony? Didn't you ask him?'

'I couldn't find him. The boys say he's gone back to Rome.'

'I thought he was supposed to be a Neapolitan?'

'No, they say in fact he came from Rome,' said Rufie, unwisely.

'From Rome? Rufie, you don't think it was Pony—?'

'Darling, he was here in the flat, the whole time you

were away.'

'But who else, who *else*? I mean, of course, I know it wasn't really Nan, but who *else*?' For a moment a smooth brown hand crossed her line of vision, reaching for a glass and she said sharply, 'Charley?'

'What, darling?' Charley was in the seventh heaven, all these wonderful, wonderful people, and the great, the distinguished top-storey surgeon from Harley Street, and he, Pakki Charley from Liverpool, a favourite guest.

'Charley, *you* didn't go down to Wren's Hill, that night?'

'To the cinema? No, darling, I told you, I was working in the library.'

'Nobody there recognised you.'

'Nobody is ever recognising us,' said Charley. 'To your people we are like a lot of sheep. Black sheep,' he added, laughing; but the look on her face of unreasoning fear made his laughter uneasy.

A brown hand, passing money through the grille at Vi Feather; accepting a ticket. 'Well, I have an idea you *were* there, Charley, why not admit it?'

The years of mindless oppression had taught Charley a quick resentment, tempered by his own innate dignity. 'Do you say I am lying, Sari. Of what are you accusing?'

'Sari, keep your voice down,' said Sofy, anxiously murmuring. 'Leave him alone, he's done nothing; he loves you. He'd do anything for you.'

'He loves us all; he'd do anything for any of us. You were there, Charley, weren't you?—with the green gravy-boat, and you drove her home and she said things against us, one of us, me, Rufie, anyone who was in the film, she could say vile things about all of us...'

'Sari, are you saying that I am strangling this woman?'

'How do I know how people like you react? I wouldn't

blame you.'

'And then I put her in your car, Sari—made trouble for you, made trouble *for you, Sari...?*'

'Well, you could have chucked her out, dead or alive, what does it matter? and we know the Followers were there —'

But he had stumbled to his feet. He made her a little bow, he repeated his little bow to the company. 'Virryvirry sorry, suddenly not feeling too top-storey, you forgive if I must hurriedly taking departure...' Two tears tumbled down the smooth brown cheeks of his young boy's face. 'Virryvirry sorry, not feeling at all top-storey...' He stood at the door and bowed once again and was off and away down the corridor outside, and into the lift before anyone could catch up with him. Sofa said, sotto voice again. 'No one else heard. Better just carry on.'

'I never said he actually—'

'I'll ring him up later,' said Sofy, 'when he's got home.'

'I'm frightened, darling. I'm absolutely on the brink, everything makes me suspicious.'

'I'll ring him later,' said Sofy, and turned away.

Phin, practised in reactions, saw with distress the increasing whitening of the beautiful face as the evening wore on, pale as a wax candle now, beneath the bright flame. 'You're tired, my sweet. Had I better start an exodus?' After all, he said laughing, they had not got much sleep last night.

'Oh, Phin, you will never leave me? You'll never unlove me?'

'I am caught in the net of Orpheus,' said Phin, 'and I do not want to go free,' and wondered what magic there was in his princess to evoke such poetry in him; and exactly what, in fact, he meant by it.

Sofy did nothing to discourage the exodus. Half an hour must be spent in earnest discussion of Sari's chances of happiness—he was great, he was simply super, so fantastically good-looking, a bit conventional of course but you'll soon cure him of that, darling, and we'll all do our level best to help you; get rid of Nanny and they'd all rally round, about the kid, because, underneath, all kids were human beans and it was just a question of what other people made them into, ... The bungalow with the Bad Habitat, the Chinese-patterned curtains and all that, oh, and the bar, darling—of course Phin wouldn't make her live there, they could even live here in the flat, after all the whole of Hampstead Heath for Ena Mee, ponds and the lot; and Phin could commute to Wren's Hill, he came up to London for his Harley Street stuff, just do it the other way round; and they could all be together still.... Whether or not any of them believed it could ever come true, might be problematical; for the moment it was all excitement and enthusiasm and devoted good wishes for her everlasting happiness....

And the shawls and the ponchos were collected and the tambourines, and they drifted away. Sofy waited till all had left but Etho and Rufie and went into Sari's bedroom to telephone.

'She's ringing Charley. I was rotten to him, I saw somebody Indian at the cinema that night and I got it into my head...'

'My dovey-darling, not Charley!'

'I didn't say anything, I only asked him—'

Sofy came back from the bedroom. 'Well, OK Sari—that's another one gone. He was sobbing his heart out, I could hear him over the telephone.' She was in tears herself. 'All that long, slow build-up of confidence; and now I don't

think Charley will ever put his trust in anyone, ever again.'

'Oh, dear God, I didn't mean it like that, I didn't mean to accuse him, poor Charley, poor darling, shall I ring him up and tell him?'

'No, Sari, I wouldn't. Charley worshipped you like a goddess; and once the image is broken, it's for ever. I don't think a nice little telephone chat even from you would do much good. Etho, would you mind?—I'd like to be going. I'll get my coat.'

Sari looked after her miserably. 'I saw his hand and I was startled, the whole thing rushed through my mind. Of course I know it was ridiculous. I'll find a way back to him.' She repeated, 'It was only that I got a glimpse, down at the cinema I got this glimpse of a—this glimpse of a—'

Her voice faltered. Sofy had appeared in the bedroom doorway, wrapped in the Jade Elephant. Sari said, slowly: 'And another glimpse. A glimpse of—green.'

You could not miss the sudden shock, the look of apprehension. 'Sofy, you were there. It's been at the back of my memory all this time—the flash of jade green.'

Sofy stood, a fat, trembling pink and white jelly, in the jade green coat. 'Anybody can wear green.'

'But not hide behind a corner in it.' She stared round wildly at the three of them. 'I can't believe it, I can't believe it...' She burst into tears. 'I'm terrified...'

'Sari, you can't think I would ever, ever do you one moment's harm?'

'Oh, Sofy!—what can I know, who can I believe...? Someone has been my enemy, someone's been in league with them. And, after all, you've been in it all from the beginning; you knew me in Rome where it all began, you knew Aldo...' And she raised her head. 'You knew Aldo, you knew him first, Sofy; he was in love with you, till I took him

away from you. I didn't mean to but I did. You could have been... How do I know...? Do you know Aldo still?—for all I know you've stayed friends with him all along and now when he needed you to help him, about his marriage, about the ring...'

The three exchanged swift glances; Etho almost imperceptibly shook his head, but his look said, only, Not yet! Sofy said dully, 'I was working at home.'

The beautiful face was growing dark, dark under its incandescent light. 'That's not true, that's a lie. Vi Feather said something about you. She said...' Her hand clawed itself in her effort to recollect. 'She said it was a pity you'd put on so much weight—'

'She'd seen me on the telly, for God's sake!'

Sari put her face in her hands and wept afresh. 'She said she'd never have recognised you; she said she didn't have television.... You're telling lies.'

Rufie crouched beside her, his arm around her shoulders, his hand pressing her wet cheek against his own. 'What could Sofy have done, darling? You can't dream for one moment that she'd kill the woman?'

'How do I know?' said Sari, sobbing. 'If she was on Aldo's side, if she knew the Followers were there, she could just—just get her outside and hand her over. If not, why is she telling lies?'

'And what did I do then?' said Sofy, hanging on tight to her control. 'Step into the Intertown bus and travel home, totally unobserved, me at my size, with my jade green elephant coat and my telly-famous face?'

'The Juanese would have seen to all that. Money's like water to them. And money! You had money, Sofy, you had money; the other day when I was going to Rome, you offered to lend it to me—'

‘Every penny I’d got in the world, plus the faint hope of a sub from the BBC. I must say, Sari, when you are a bitch you are God’s own bitch!’

The terrible tears. ‘Oh, Sofy, Sofy, I don’t want to believe it, I don’t want to believe anything against you. But it’s someone, there’s someone... Who can I trust, how can I ever be sure...?’

Etho’s eyes again consulted the other two. ‘Sari! Hush, darling, be quiet now, and listen. Yes, all right Sofy was there; and I was there too. We went down together, Sofy wanted to see herself as she was then and I wanted to see you as *you* were then—and you are even more lovely, far more lovely now. But we went there together in my car and we drove back together in my car; and Sofy spoke to nobody else but me till I dropped her at the flats and came on home.’

She lifted her tear-stained face. ‘You drove her home?’

Quiet and cool, he fished out his handkerchief, passed it across to her, went on quietly speaking. ‘Yes, to her flats. We left well before the picture was over—we knew how it went, there was nothing after that but pictures of the stand-in in large concealing hats, you wretch! We had a perfect right to go, Sari, you haven’t got a monopoly *The Spanish Steps*, but we didn’t want you to know and be upset. So we skipped the end, and got by long before the tree fell and that’s all there was to it.’

She thought about it. ‘But Etho... You said you were at home—and Rufie was with you.’

‘The ‘phone was ringing when I got in. Rufie’d been ringing the whole evening—’

‘And trying to ring Sofa,’ said Rufie. ‘I was so bored, darling—’

But she said, quickly: ‘So you knew neither of them was

at home, when they said they were?’

‘I knew they’d been together the whole evening, so there was no point saying anything about it, and making a fuss with you and a fuss with the police. Etho answered at last, having got home early, like he says, and said come on round, because of course I was made to know how the film had worn, how you’d looked in it, and Sofy and my dresses and everything. So I whizzed over and he told me all about it and I came home.’

She said, heavily: ‘Yes, I see. So in fact it *is* true—you’ve all been deceiving me?’

‘But, my darling, darling, not to do you any harm. For your good, in fact—not to let you get upset about Etho and Sofy nipping down and seeing the film, when you wanted to keep it private to yourself.’

‘I can only think how easy it is to be deceived. Even by people you trust. In fact especially, I suppose, by the people you can trust—well, people you believe you can trust.’ She pushed back the soft hair, lack-lustre, with the back of her hand. ‘Well—I think Etho’s right, you’d better go now, I’ll just go to bed.’ As Etho stood up she went to him, put her hands on his shoulders and laid her cheek against his. ‘Goodnight, love.’ And to Sofy, still standing in the doorway, ‘Darling—forgive me! Sometimes I think with all this terror, this—dread—I think I’m going out of my mind.’

The sweet, pleading face, beautiful as it had ever been, pleading through its ravishment of tears. ‘I’m so bitterly sorry. These things come breaking out like a sort of—like a sort of caged-up horror breaking out from all the terrors inside my mind...’

But for Sofy, the end had come. Sweet natured, warmhearted, in her shocked grief she allowed herself the one vicious moment of her life. ‘All I can say, Sari, is that

you should put rather stronger bars around your mental cage. Right, left and centre you accuse us of lying to you and cheating you and deceiving you! Some miracle you are, yourself, of honesty!—I wonder how much your dear Phin would like it if he knew your story to us, of how you got his ring? Or would he prefer the other version, that that was all just one of your fantasies and the reality is, you simply pinched it from the shop?’

She was paralysed, speechless with a perfectly genuine indignation. ‘Oh, come off it, Sari!—you’re always pinching things, you’ve got no more moral sense than a cat: it’s just a bit of naughtiness and fun to you and then you make up some nonsense to amuse yourself and us. But I wonder how much it’s going to amuse your dear Phin?’ Etho went across to her but she beat down his restraining hand. ‘And he’ll need something to amuse him during his long years in prison, won’t he? When you accuse all of *us*, Sari, who’ve been your friends all these years, just ask yourself about your precious Phin, whom you’ve hardly known a week. Because you needn’t think the police aren’t asking!’

‘Sofy, darling—!’

‘Shut up, Etho, you know it too, we all know it was Phin—wide open to blackmail, at the cinema that night, out in the storm. Of course he was the man at the tree, she knows that herself; of course he killed the woman, of course he simply, God knows how, but he did it—simply returned Sari’s car with the body in the back of it; left her, whoever she was—because he didn’t know then—to carry the can. So put that in your treacherous, bloody little pipe, Sari, and smoke it!—and please God I never have to set eyes on you again for as long as I live...’ She slammed out into the corridor, and leaning against Etho’s shoulder, broke into tears of remorse and shame; and dried her eyes and said

again, ‘God damn her! I’ll never bloody see her again!’ and wept afresh. She flung back the leafless jungle with its curious creatures in all their unwonted colours, crept into her bed and laid her weary head against the great, square, down-filled pillows; and with the turning out of the light, the darkness flooded in—a darkness deeper and blacker and more filled with night-stirrings of the unknown, than any mere darkness of the closing of the day. That Phin was a murderer, she knew in the depths of her heart to be untrue; but that Phin was even yet lying to her, deceiving her, deceiving them all? That Phin was in danger from the police? Oh, God, she prayed, to that God whom so recently she had denied, oh Christ, don’t let me lose him, don’t take him away from me! So little left to her now. Like wounded animals, those she loved, those who had loved her, before the mindless outbreaks of her caged terrors, were tearing themselves away out of her life, and she knew they would return no more. I betray them, she thought; I betray their loving and trusting me when I know, I know, the accusations aren’t true...

But the Followers...

Sleepless through the terrible silence of the long night. And yet throughout it all, with no conscience as Sofy had truly said, for the everyday virtues of ordinary, everyday men—it had never so much as entered her mind to commit the one, ultimate betrayal that would long ago have brought an end to all her fears.

The rose in darkness: with the last darkness, closing, closing in.

14

AND NEXT MORNING... ALAS, no great ringings round, for who was there left to call? 'Etho? Yes, soundo. I don't know, I was a dud last night, I couldn't go on any more; I took a lot of stuff and quietly passed out. I was a bit hopped anyway, well, but natch, at a party.'

'I've already rung Sofy. No hope. She says to be kind, say she's not furious any more but she just won't come back. So it's you and me, Rufie; but there's still precious Phin—and if he can take her away out of all this, well she can begin again and maybe with the atmosphere a bit more straightened out...?'

'What do you think?'

'Essentially very sound. To us he's a bit stuffed but it's the other side of the coin and it could be right for her, after all. She'll soon shake out enough of the stuffing and, you know Sari, she can get away with anything. She'll have Harley Street painting its faces in stripes and practising witch-doctoring before you know it, everyone simply loving it. And he's mad about her, it's pretty real this time. But meanwhile?'

'A Dunkirk I should think, wouldn't you?' said Rufie. The retreat. Refusing to leave the flat, to leave her bedroom, to leave her bed: the retreat to the womb. 'Well, he's a doctor, Rufie, the wife was a bit of a psychopath, he must have an understanding mind. Tell him she had a bad shock after he left, one of her friends quarrelled with her and walked out, and she takes things hard; just not to question her or bother her but simply love her and she'll come to. You know, Rufie,' said Etho, slowly thinking it over, 'I

believe this may be the right one at last. One can only pray. Meanwhile—Dunkirk. Be at home as much as you can; I'm snowed under myself this week, but I'll try and help out.'

Rufie accordingly stayed in, rang up Phin and declared a state of 'flu and when Phin said he'd chance it, wear a mask and all that, most brilliantly transmuted the 'flu to suspected German measles. Phin would not subject his patients to such risks, and Sari was said to feel too sick and miserable to telephone, so quiet reigned all round. She remained in bed, plied by an understanding doctor with large doses of sedative, Rufie propped his little paint-pots along his pillow and worked upon ever more enchantingly bizarre designs. To Mr Cecil, anxiously enquiring, he replied that for the moment he was going to be reticent, but they'd all go beresk when they saw them—based on the yellow robes that those people wore, hopping along Oxford Street with tambourines...

The retreat lasted its normal three days and on the Thursday Sari awoke, refreshed and calmed by the long quiet rest, and rang up Phin with the glad news that it had never been German measles at all, just a bit of the snuffles and a lot of exhaustion from far too much happiness. Phin was deeply thankful but for the moment hung up by two special cases, terribly tricky, and no cajolements (his love was going to have to learn) would persuade him to desert anyone in need of his professional care. And tomorrow was frantic. The ladies would be safe by then but now Nanny had 'gone down, what with her tooth' and was going to have to spend the day in hospital for a minor anaesthetic and dental operation—and it was Mummy's Day to have Ena Meena. Mummy, though insisting fiercely upon her rights, in exercising them was capricious to a degree and upon this occasion, the Day was to last from three o'clock in

the afternoon till half-past five. 'I've rearranged my cases at Harley Street and got them to postpone the first one till a quarter to twelve, so I can bring Ena Meena up with me and she can hang about in the waiting-room, the porter will look after her; and then I'll have to take her out to lunch and hand her over and then come back to Harley Street. And then pick her up and take her home. So I don't see how we can possibly meet, my darling...'

'Oh, but it's easy,' said Sari, enchanted by all this earnest planning, what bliss, after all, what peace, to have everything charted out in advance, to know where one was going! 'It's perfect. I'll come out to lunch with you.'

Phin was slightly shaken. 'But I'll have her with me. And darling, she's—difficult.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Sari happily. 'I'll bring her a presie.'

It took her and Rufie all day to find the right presie but she duly turned up with it next morning and confronted Ena Meena who was sitting banging her heels against fine old mahogany chair legs in her father's very grand waiting-room, fortunately now empty of other patients.

'Hallo, Ena Mee, it's me.' She laughed. 'That's rather funny—Ena Mee, it's me.'

'I don't think so,' said Ena Mee. She looked at her curiously. Sari was wearing the tawny leather coat with a bright headscarf tied under her chin and over it, the huge Stetson-shaped black hat. 'Why have you got that scarf on?'

'Well, you said you didn't like the colour of my hair, so I covered it up.'

Ena Mee stared at her in a wide-eyed astonishment. 'Why should you care what *I* like? I'm only a child. Nobody bothers about what children like.'

'Well, I do,' said Sari. 'I want you to like me.' She knelt

down and placed a large basket on the floor. 'I've brought you a present.'

('And you watch it when she starts giving you presents, Ena Mee. It's only 'cos she's after yer father.') 'I don't want any presents, thank you,' said Ena Mee.

'You'll want this one.' She opened a door in the side of the basket and out walked a tiny black piglet with a large ribbon bow. 'Pigs make simply wonderful pets.'

Open-mouthed with rapture, Ena Mee flung herself down and on hands and knees confronted the pig. (And that makes two of them, thought Sari.) 'It's a little baby pig! Is it mine?'

'Yes, of course it is, it's your present. What'll you call it?'

'Piggy,' said Ena Mee, simply. What else?

'I think we can think of something better than that. Let it trot about a bit and stretch its little legs. It's been cooped up in that basket. I was terrified it would squeal and give itself away before you saw what the present was.'

'Can it squeal?'

'You wait! And grunt like all hell. Oh, my God,' cried Sari suddenly. 'Ena Mee!'

'What's the matter?'

'My God, darling—look! It's made a mess on the carpet!'

Ena Mee clapped her hand over her mouth and spewed out sufficiently pig-like squeals of horrified laughter. Two conspirators, they rootled in the safari bag, found tissues and mopped away at the carpet. 'Quick, quick!' said Ena Mee, stricken but safe behind grown-up petticoats, 'there's somebody coming. What shall we do with it?'

'In my bag—?'

'It's so smelly!'

Two large and handsome vases stood sentinel on the marble chimney-piece. Shoulders hunched, teeth biting on lower lip in an embodiment of mischievous wickedness, Sari tiptoed across and popped the dirty paper into one of them, and strolled back all propriety and innocence. Ena Mee doubled up in confidential laughter and Phin came into the room.

He had chosen a suitable restaurant for small girls to lunch in, but Sari was adamant. ‘Oh, no, Ena Mee, let’s make him take us to the Ritz!’ Upon Phin’s suggestion that the Ritz might not care to accommodate the third member of their party (What on God’s earth was Nanny going to say?) she poured iced water. ‘He’ll be perfectly all right, he’ll just stay in his basket. If he makes any noises, Ena Mee, you and me’ll have to talk in a terribly gobbling sort of way and cover it over.’ All the way in the taxi they practised the gobbles, interspersed with small, shrill squealings. Phin lavishly tipped the driver.

The luncheon was a riot. The menu was chosen with care, strictly limited to what would suit piglets, and the creature kept silent with contented munchings of offerings surreptitiously passed down from their plates. By the time the second course was over—acceptable for pigs perhaps but highly unsuitable for little girls—Ena Mee was in tears at having to go to Mummy’s. ‘I want to stay with Sari.’

‘Oh, come on, love, of course you want to go and see your mummy...’

‘Mummy won’t let me keep Piggy.’ She assumed, unconsciously, a Nanny voice. ‘She wouldn’t have that creature in the house.’

‘I’ll take him back with me and you and Daddy can pick him up on your way home; and then you can see *my* house.’

‘Can’t I come with you and wait for Daddy at your

house?’

‘Ena Mee,’ said Phin, ‘of course you want to go and see Mummy.’

‘I don’t like Uncle Ronald. He’s fat and his face is all dark round the edges. Nanny says never mind five o’clock shadow—it looks more like midnight coming on, and Mummy said her skin was getting like a nutmeg grater. Why should Uncle Ronald being black on his chin make Mummy’s skin like a nutmeg grater? Daddy, why should Uncle Ronald’s black chin—’

‘And for that matter, what is a nutmeg grater?’ said Sari. But she recollected that it was something that you grated nutmeg with to make simply horrible things like junket taste even worse. ‘Do you hate junket, Ena Mee?’

‘Yes, I do, and I hate custard.’

‘Oh, custard can be lovely if it’s caramel custard. I’ll have some for my pudding and you can taste it.’

Ena Mee accepted a taste of the Ritz version of a caramel custard, compounded largely of Jersey cream, seized the plate and gobbled the lot. ‘You must ask Nanny to make you something just like it,’ said Sari, evilly smiling.

‘We must go,’ said Phin.

More tears. ‘Come on, love, you don’t want to hurt your Mummy’s feelings? And at the same time you can be watching Uncle Ronald, because I’ve got an idea, I’ve thought of another name for Piggy.’ She hung an arm round the back of Ena Mee’s chair and whispered in her ear. Ena Mee outdid Piggy in ecstatic squealing.

With the child dragging on her arm, she went off down the wide corridor, breaking into a little skip and a hop, the newly christened Ronald grunting in his basket in alarm. Heads turned to watch them go, the tall girl, slender in her tawny leather coat, the face with its high cheekbones

unbelievably beautiful, tied close around with the coloured scarf under the huge black hat, the stout little girl skipping along at her side. Phin following half embarrassed, reflected ruefully that in his life there were going to be changes he had not accounted for; but he saw his child more happy and carefree than she had been for many, many days, and his heart overflowed with the tenderness of his love.

Triumphant, she went home to the flat, Ronald in his basket at her side, replete with his gourmet luncheon, contentedly grunting. Rufie would have gone off to Christophe's with his drawings but he'd be back by the evening and she'd get Etho to come in and they'd help her with Ena Mee. Fellers were money for jam, thought Sari, compared with trying to enchant small girls. Really one felt sorry for poor exhausted paedophiles...

The late post had come and a large squarish envelope lay face down in the letter-box. No note this time, pushed surreptitiously through. The front was decorated with enormous highly ornamental stamps.

She put down the basket carefully and ripped the letter open; and a moment later was lying in a dead faint with the piglet squealing at her side.

No Etho to be contacted; no Rufie. She rang up Mr Charlesworth. He thought it over carefully. He said at last: 'You opened the door and there it was?'

'In the letter-box.'

'By the perfectly ordinary mail?'

'Yes, it's post-marked, dates and all.'

'So you can't really tell me any more? You don't recognise the hand-writing?'

‘No, just that terribly boring emasculated continental script.’

‘The same as the last one? Oh, but that one had no writing on it, did it?’

‘But the sketch is by the same person. At least, the same sort of style.’

‘And the seal?’

‘Yes, the same seal. I mean, the seal of San Juan, but I think it’s the same actual seal, a bit worn and battered.’

‘OK, well... Now look, Miss Morne, will you do this for me? We’ve got men at the flats, the porter will know. Get hold of one called Jenkins. From now on, don’t touch the sketch or the envelope more than you can possibly help; Jenkins will collect them from you and bring them to me.’

‘Yes, all right.’

‘You’re not scared?’

‘I got a bit of a shock but I’m all right now. Besides,’ said Sari cheering up at a grunt from the piglet. ‘I’ve got a friend with me.’

‘Well, there’ll still be someone on duty there and I’ll replace Jenkins. Thanks very much. I’ll be in touch with you.’

‘All right. But not between six and—say, half-past seven, if you don’t mind. I’ve got my fiancé bringing his kiddy wink to see me and we don’t want invasions of the fuzz into our happy little family gathering; complete with pig.’

‘Complete with what?’

‘Well, with pig. Ronald, his name is, the world’s charmer. But anyway, don’t come till they’ve all gone.’

She prepared with scrupulous care for Ena Mee’s reception; rang Etho and briefed him, hilariously briefed Rufie when he got home. But he saw that her eyes were

deeply shadowed, that her horrors again beset her. 'Dovey, everything's not all right. You're scaring me.'

'I'm a bit scared myself. I wasn't going to say, I've got to put on an act for this kid, we've all got to, it could mean my whole future. But... Well, I can't keep it in, at least I'll just tell you. A letter came from San Juan, a real letter all stamps and postmarks, addressed to me and sealed. And Rufie—inside it was another sketch.'

'Oh, Sari, my God! And you all alone here!'

'Well—only me and R. Pig. I was so frightened that I actually passed out, at least I came to and I was on the floor and poor Ronald, frightened out of his wits, I suppose, by the great hump of me falling, squealing like a—like an Ena Mee.'

'But where is it? Let me see it!'

But no, a chap called Jenkins had collected it, all surgical steel nippers and a little plastic bag, terrifically impressive, and taken it off to Mr Charlesworth. Only, said Sari, shuddering, the *sketch* ...!

Crudely drawn. A child, a boy, one leg at an unnatural angle, with smudged-in, witless face: holding a dagger in its little hand.

15

THERE WAS SOMETHING IN the post for Mr Charlesworth also, that came like a great gust of wind, blowing away a thousand obliterating feathers, leaving the collage clear of all but patches of harder and sounder materials, beginning to jiggle themselves at last into some sort of form. ‘And by God, Ginger, they’re all going to be there this evening, Master Devigne and even that kid that went on this famous picnic; and here’s the perfect excuse to visit them!’ He peered for the hundredth time at the seal on the envelope. ‘You’re certain it’s the same?’

‘You’ve only to compare them. This ridge here, this roughening. Tomaso di Goya—’

‘OK, OK, I’m sorry I asked. No handwriting on the first to be compared; but, spare me the National Gallery and just answer in one word, you agree these drawings are by the same hand?’ He repeated threateningly: ‘One—word.’

‘D’accord,’ said Ginger, falling back upon the last line of offence.

‘If you mean yes, say yes.’

‘Yes,’ said Ginger.

‘And on the same paper?’

‘Yes,’ said Ginger.

‘But the envelope is different?’

‘Yes,’ said Ginger. Without actually saying it aloud he asked: ‘Permission to speak, sir?’ and taking it as granted, added, ‘But that you’d expect, sir, *wouldn’t* you?’ Mummy had been suffering less, of late, from the nutmeg-grated skin and was beginning to be afraid of losing grip, and assiduous in blandishments. ‘I know what a bore it is, Ronnie dear,

and lord knows I have her here as little as I can. If I'd known you were going to be at home today... Another time, I'll just take her out somewhere, only it's so dreary, hanging about, what shall we do next Mummy?—all those ghastly cinemas and if I ever again hear the word ice-cream—! You must say, darling, I'm a bit of a heroine?’

‘Nothing in the world is such a bore’, said Ronnie, adopting without too much difficulty a Cockney accent, ‘as yer actural heroine.’

Typically she transferred the onus to the child. ‘You’re so tiresome and silly, you get on Uncle Ron’s nerves; if you go on like this, you won’t be able to come here any more.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Ena Mee, rudely. ‘I didn’t want to come anyway, I wanted to stay with Sari.’

‘That woman!’ Unfortunately, That Woman appeared not to be a patient; a very positive threat. ‘And letting you eat such a lunch! No wonder you were sick; all that disgusting mess...’

‘It didn’t worry *you*,’ said Ena Mee resentfully, having in fact sicked up very neatly into the loo and been left to do any clearing up by her small self. ‘And don’t call her That Woman!’

‘How dare you speak to me, Ena Mee, like that? I’ll call her what I damn well please. And one thing more, my child, if you think I’m going to allow you to keep a pig—a pig, Ronnie, can you believe it?—*in my house*—’

‘It isn’t your house any more,’ said Ena Mee. ‘You went away so it’s my house now and Daddy’s. And if I say so, it could be Sari’s too.’ She assumed the Nanny voice and added, cockily: ‘And if you don’t behave yourself, my dear, I might.’

All the more soul-stirring then, the reunion with the piglet.

Sari, alive to the passion in human beings for stuffing food down the throats of dumb animals, had considerably prepared it a supper which remained as yet uneaten. Rufie was shocked by her resistance to its pitiful squeaks of protest; the creature was obviously at starvation level. 'Well, a couple of drags then, just to jolly him up till she gets here?' He himself was more than a couple in advance; the episode of the Juanese letter had terrified him anew—he could not understand Sari's comparative calm. 'Rufie darling, if you knew the ordeal I've been through today, you'd know that the Grand Duke in person, scimitar in hand, couldn't shake me.'

But he knew her too well. 'It's because of Phin, Sari, isn't it? Because of what Sofy said about Phin doing the murder? While we know, and the police know, that the Followers really are around, then they can't get on to Phin. And you'd rather have them after you, than the police after Phin.'

'But then I've always known they were around, so it's no great shock to me.'

'It must have been, if you passed out.'

'Well, the sketch, so disgusting, my poor little orphling with this huge, big knife dripping blood!'

He had contacted Etho meanwhile and informed him, but warned him to know nothing until after Phin's departure. Phin must leave fairly early to get the child home to bed. 'Well, Rufie, a quick wee and a new face on, and Luigi will have to appear, so I hope she loves me now enough to accept him.' And she departed, reappearing duly aflame, in the Garden of Eden pants and a bra painted with two apples, the whole half-concealed by a long, palely shimmering kaftan. 'I thought she'd adore Adam and Eve; and of course Phin's never seen it.'

‘Just the job, he’ll think, for shopping with the other medical wives in the Wren’s Hill High Street.’

‘Oh, Rufie!—you don’t know how wonderful—yes, shopping-lists and knowing what you’re going to eat, right up till the day after tomorrow. The *plans*, my dear, and all worked out, everything so convenient, we’ll bring Ena Mee here, we’ll go to lunch there, everything booked in advance, no having to flash one’s teeth and eyelashes to get a banquette table. It’s like Bernhardt said—the deep, deep peace of the feather bed.’

‘I’m happy for you, darling,’ said Rufie, who had no idea what his own next bed would be or where; on to what pillow he would lay his cuckoo head.

Excited squeakings outside the door, the extraordinary idea apparently prevailing in Phin’s mind that it would be locked, one wouldn’t just push it open and walk in. Luigi and the Biblicals were lost in the rapture of huggings and kissings for Ronald Pig. ‘God knows what Nanny is going to say,’ said Phin, in mock despair.

‘Sack the old bag,’ said Sari, ‘because I promise you *I* shall, anyway, on Day One.’

His heart shook a little, My God he wondered, have I gone mad?—have I gone mad mad or have I gone mad sane? ‘Dearest, darling, what do you know about bringing up children?’

‘Nothing at all,’ agreed Sari. ‘But just look at her now.’

And Etho arrived with a bottle of champagne straight off the ice and it was all tremendously civilised in a weird sort of way; as Etho had said to Sari in another context, there was more than one answer and to Phin, as once it had to Nan, a new light began to shine upon one’s way of life; the excellent restaurants robbed by familiarity of any excitement, the agreeable friends with not a new thought in

their heads, the exactly right clothes... That his lady should open the hospital bazaar in her present costume, was clearly not on; on the other hand, what fun, what charm, a bit of foolishness in the privacy of one's home.... And Etho was delightful in his cool amusability and the little queer was a little queer but so vital and original and one could always choose carefully and explain first, when one had people to dinner. And his little girl was not mopily whining; and what was wrong with a pig? confined of course to rather less vulnerable quarters. And his love was so sweet and so funny and so beautiful and kind....

There was someone else, evidently, who paused for doors to be opened to them. For there came a knock and the police, suitably apologetic, were waiting to invite themselves in.

Among these four, thought Chief Inspector Charlesworth, unctuously proffering regrets at having been obliged to arrive earlier than expected—among these four people is a murderer.

Or two murderers in collusion? Or three in collusion? Among the Eight Best Friends there had been, always, an underlying sense of all for one and one for all, which had by no means escaped him—and the combinations and computations were endless. But one pair of hands had strangled the woman, and he was looking for that one pair of hands.

Pale hands, lovely hands, narrow, with long, oval palely varnished nails—which yet with sufficient strength might fasten upon a scrawny throat. White hands, wristed with a tinkle of gold bracelets, as capable of the same. Fine hands, well-shaped, well cared for with a man's simple, casual care; and the hands of a surgeon, long in the palm

with short blunt fingers trained to the mind's will, and very strong.

Sari, Rufie, Etho, Phineas Devigne. He had boiled it down to these four.

And here present also, a stout little girl whose innocent head might well, all unknowingly, hold the secret of which pair of hands had killed.

He civilly brushed aside all repudiations, and simply walked into the room. Just a matter, he explained, of the extraordinary communications that had come through Miss Morne's letterbox. The first on the Tuesday after the murder —which had been committed, as they were hardly likely to forget, on the previous Saturday night; the second today, Friday, almost a fortnight after the woman had died. 'Sergeant Ellis will pass them round among you; it's OK to handle them now.' The envelopes, one blank except for the seal, the second addressed in a hand which so far nobody claimed to recognise; but anyway a not very easily recognisable hand, a copy-book, sloping script without much exposition of character. Thought by the experts to be certainly not any attempt at disguise. To 'Miss Sari Morne', at this address. The envelope bearing stamps of the island of San Juan el Pirata, with the island's postmark and a legible date and the ordinary London postmarks, confirming date of arrival.

And if they would care to compare the seals... And the sketches...

Curled up in a chair, Ena Mee sat blissful and unaware in her absorption with Ronald Pig.

With the trump-card he now held in his hand Mr Charlesworth had prepared himself very carefully for the interviews to come.

Accept once and for all that Vi Feather had been a

blackmailer. Blackmailers come in many shapes and forms and in the vast number of cases are merely opportunists. And blackmail itself comes in many forms; from knowledge of some secret so trivial as to seem nothing in any eyes but the eyes of those who hold it —to discovery of a secret that may cost a man all that is dear to him even to his very life.

Phineas Devigne had a secret that was new; but Vi Feather had known the three others long ago and might have held secrets that were old. For the moment it was academic, what secrets she might have known.

The case against Sari Morne was—to Mr Charlesworth's infinite regret—the most obvious of all.

She leaves the cinema, she calls in at the pub, she passes before the tree falls, she drives straight home. Somewhere along the way she kills the woman and leaves the body in the back of her car.

Objections. At the time she left the pub the body was not in the back of the car. In the boot? But why then transfer it to the place where it was found? And the experts are sure that nothing, let alone a dead body, very difficult to lift and handle, in wet clothes, with bedraggled wet hair—has ever been in the boot of that brand new car. Picked up somewhere along the way, then, between pub and home? But where? And why not simply bundle the body out by the lonely roadside in the heart of the storm? Or Vi Feather was waiting for her in the garage shed, when she arrived home? But how did the woman get there?—the police had long ago eliminated all but some manner of transport deliberately being kept secret. And killing her there, why heave the body into the car and leave it there? Objections; but minor objections—all explicable by collusion, by knowledge and assistance before or after the fact.

Only one great objection: impossible if there had been an exchange of cars when the tree fell.

The case against Ethelbert Wendover. Had known the woman in Rome. Had possible reasons for going to the cinema, and for going secretly since Sari had insisted that all her friends stay away.

Objections. An alibi but an alibi covering a time which would still have allowed him, having left the cinema early (and he must have done so, to have avoided the fall of the tree) to be at home with an appearance of having been there all along.

The case against Rupert Soames—more or less identical. Objections identical also. It must however be observed that there might be mutual advantages in these alibis, offered by a couple of close friends.

Come then to the far more complicated case of Phineas Devigne. Had Phineas Devigne, or had he not, exchanged cars with Sari Morne at the fallen tree?

No such exchange took place? The story was made up by Sari Morne inspired by her recognition of a car identical with her own, passing her on the road just before the fall of the tree?

No exchange then: and the case against Phineas Devigne.

Motive very strong: blackmailed on account of an affair, which could have cost him the custody of his child, to an unfit mother.

He meets Vi Feather outside the cinema or picks her up along the way, kills her and conceals her body in the back

of the car, drives on and dines with his mistress; drives home, calling in on his patient at the pub, The Fox.

Objections. No sign that the body had ever lain in the back of his car. But the car had been into the garage for an all-over servicing, would have been thoroughly hoovered, polished, cleaned out. A young lout at the garage had been entrusted with this service but, similarly employed day in and day out on other cars, could remember nothing particular about any of them.

The same, when one came to the boot, must apply to the boot.

But—would he leave the body in the back of the car anyway, rather than hide it in the boot? Answer: if he had killed her in the car, it might well be less dangerous than stopping by the roadside or wherever else, and lugging the body into the boot.

Very well then—he drives home alone toward's Wren's Hill passing before the fall of the tree; picks up the woman along the way or even finds her waiting for him, when, having visited his patient, he comes out of the pub; strangles her and drives straight on home. (The time element allows for no diversion between his leaving The Fox and arriving home.)

Objection: no opportunity to leave the house between the time he gets home that night and starts off again the next morning with the nurse and child; and at that time, most certainly the body was not lying behind the driving seat in the back of the car.

And even more to the point—the body is found, not in his car anyway, but in Sari Morne's.

Imparse, as Ginger would have said.

So play it that he did indeed exchange cars with Sari Morne at the tree—what then?

He has killed the woman before he arrives at the restaurant to dine; or—but the time element very nearly rules this out—he kills her between the time of his leaving the restaurant and his arrival at the tree. Either way, the body is already there when Sari Morne turns and drives his car home to Hampstead.

Objection: But the body is found in Sari Morne's own car.

Driving her car, then, and after exchange at the tree, he meets Vi Feather and kills her; and now her body is in Sari Morne's car.

Objection: once again—no opportunity whatsoever to have swapped the cars back, between the time he arrived home that night and the time he set off for the picnic in Greenwich with the nurse and little girl.

Point inexplicable: there lay on the body as though fallen there, a short stemmed red rose such as a man might...

A mist as red as the rose suffused, all of a sudden, Mr Charlesworth's mind. A picnic at Greenwich—twelve miles across the London traffic from Sari Morne's home. A red rose, And a man who always wore a buttonhole.

He shook his head clear; he went across and sat on the arm of Ena Mee's chair and stroked the moist black nose of gently snoring Ronald Pig. 'Gosh, you'll have fun with him!' he said.

'You can put him on a little lead and take him out for walks. And picnics. I expect he'll love picnics. I know *you* do.'

'I didn't like the last one,' said Ena Mee. 'We came away and had it on a bench at the zoo. I gave all mine to the monkeys.'

'What, all that lovely food? I expect you had lots. Do

you have a big picnic basket? Does it have to go in the boot of the car?’

‘No, Nanny had it beside her and the tarpauling, folded up; there was hardly room for Nanny. Nanny said can’t you put it in the boot but Daddy said, oh, for heaven’s sake, it’s all right where it is.’

‘Chief Superintendent,’ said Phin, angrily, ‘what is this?’

‘Well—just chatting. About picnics; no harm in that? My little girl loves Greenwich Park,’ said Charlesworth, lying in his teeth. ‘Didn’t you like Greenwich Park, Ena Mee? After all, you had your Daddy to play with you all the time.’

Phin looked up again sharply. ‘That’s enough! Leave the child alone,’ but Ena Mee was not listening. ‘He wasn’t with us *all* the time, he went and left a message and Nanny got more and more cross.’ The voice: ‘Him and his women! A message about a case, indeed!’

‘That’ll do, Ena Mee,’ said Phin. ‘I was away exactly ten minutes. And it was not a lady.’

‘Oh yes it was!’ said Ena Mee in an unlovely jeering tone.

‘In fact it was not.’

‘Oh yes it was!’ said Ena Mee again; and since he would not continue a back-and-forth argument, added: ‘You wouldn’t give a flower to a man. But when you came back, you didn’t have your red rose in your buttonhole.’

The shock ran through them like a physical shiver. Mr Charlesworth walked across to the window and looked out at the falling away of the heathland down to the silver gleam of the ponds at the foot of the hill. Phin had got up out of his chair and stood ramrod straight, as though he protected his child. When at last Charlesworth spoke,

however, it was to say, easily, casually, 'All the same Ena Mee—such a lovely place! Up at the top of the hill, looking down at the river.'

'We didn't like it,' said Ena Mee. 'Dull old grass and a few bushes and only a weeny little bit of the river. Nanny said she'd never been there before and she never was coming there again, messages or no messages. And Ronald wouldn't like it either; we'll never take Ronald there.'

'It's nicer out here on Hampstead Heath.'

'Well, we've never been on Hamstid Heath either. But we will now that we know Sari. Ronald and me will often go on Hamstid Heath.'

'I bet,' said Charlesworth and could hardly keep his voice from shaking. He stooped down and ticked the piglet. 'Oh, dear, I believe I've woken him up! And now he'll be hungry again. Ginger, why don't you go with Ena Mee into the kitchen and try and rustle up something for Ronald to eat?' And as the sergeant led the child, happily skipping, out of the room, he swung round upon Phin Devigne. 'So?'

'So,' said Phin with a desperate, weary shrug.

'So you drove them round, this ignorant countrywoman and innocent child, made a detour through the busy streets and brought them back here to Hampstead. You were not in Greenwich, Mr Devigne, on the other side of London: you were here on the heath, a few minutes away from these flats.'

They were all on their feet now, rising as by some unconscious impulsion from their places, stunned with astonishment. Sari stood close to Phin, her two hands clasped with an ever tightening grip about his right arm. Now she released her grasp, moved back from him, stared wildly from Charlesworth's face to his and cried out, '*Phin?*'

'I didn't kill her,' he said. 'I didn't kill her.' And to Charlesworth he blurted out, almost stupidly: 'Her body was in my car.'

Etho, ever coolest in any company. 'Inspector—could we take a moment's breather?' And he was moving swiftly, motioning them back to their seats, with a hand against his chest actually pushing Rufie down; and was filling up glasses, thrusting a glass into Charlesworth's hand who stood almost as shaken as they. Duty or no duty, Charlesworth took a great gulp before he put the glass aside. From the kitchen came the happy squeakings of Ena Mee and Ronald; Ginger would doubtless be standing very close indeed to the intervening door.

It had all been managed so quickly and neatly, a sort of ordered shock tactic that the briefest of moments seemed to have passed. Charlesworth, still standing, said, 'Well, then, Mr Devigne?'

His face was ashen, he sat upright on the couch, Sari in her shimmering gown sitting close, with her hands on his arm again, but leaning backwards away from him, her eyes on his face. Rufie's face was a sheet of blank white paper; he put the glass aside blindly. Etho leaned across from his own chair, put the glass back into his hand and said, 'Drink it!'

'Well, Mr Devigne?'

He said again, 'I didn't kill the woman. All the rest... ' He jerked his head towards the kitchen door. 'It was for her.'

'So?'

'Yes, of course it was me at the tree,' said Phin. 'I had to get back, I couldn't let it come out that I'd been at The Angel.' He made no more secret of any of it. 'The whole affair was madness, I was trying to break it up; they only

know now about an occasional luncheon or dinner, the Press have ferreted all that out of course, but that's all they know at The Angel; and they're nice people there, they've been discreet. But of course there was more to it than that, I'd lost my head completely—'

‘And Miss Feather might have discovered that?’

‘No, no, Inspector, that rat won’t run! She might have recognised that I didn’t always stay at the cinema; she couldn’t know more. I’d hardly murder a woman for what *she* might have known.’

‘But even the few luncheons and dinners, could get a bit awkward?’

‘If that damned nurse knew—she’d tell my ex. and *she’d* soon get weaving. So I simply had to get home.’ He paused for so long that Charlesworth prompted: ‘But then, there you were landed with this stranger’s car.’

‘Yes, well... I’d given her a wrong ‘phone number,’ he said, with a gesture towards Sari. ‘I deliberately put my finger on it, my glove absolutely sodden, so that it would half obliterate the thing. So she couldn’t get in touch with *me*, I couldn’t have that happening, I couldn’t let the nurse know about the exchange of cars; that would place me on the wrong side of the tree and *she’d* have been through to my wife in a flash. And if I’d taken them to Hampstead, same thing, they’d have placed some girlfriend in Hampstead—it was a girl I’d swapped cars with—and my wife would have rootled out this girl and God knows what could have happened. So—I played this trick; Nanny knows nothing about London, I just drove around a bit to look as if we were driving through town-y streets to Greenwich—in case anyone asked them; I have to watch every step and... Well, you’ve got it,’ he said to Charlesworth. ‘I parked them there, with a glimpse of the ponds and told them it was the

river; if they'd found out it would have been a joke of some kind... Even from that,' he said, 'you can see it wasn't all that serious. Would I have taken such chances if there'd been any question in my mind about a murder?'

'I knew you were the man at the tree,' said Sari. 'Of course, I knew you. They didn't believe me, about the tree. But knowing it was true, I knew the man must have been you. And they never believe about the Followers, but I knew they were true too, so I didn't worry because all the rest was just the Followers.'

'But the next part... I couldn't explain it to you, Sari, I just had to keep saying it wasn't me. And you didn't ask.'

'I just knew about the Followers. Nobody else believed in the Followers but I knew. So I knew whatever had happened, it must be them.'

'Mr Devigne—please,' said Charlesworth.

'I'm sorry. Yes. So, well...' His shoulders dragged, he half closed his eyes, he looked as though he might topple forward in a faint, supported only by her clinging to his arm. 'I made them this excuse about leaving the message. I meant to go to the address she'd given me, get the car keys from her and make the exchange and hurry back. But I could see the Halcyon in this open shed, my own Halcyon. I drove in beside it and I saw that the keys were still hanging in the ignition. Well, all the better, I thought, I'll simply swap back and she need never know who I was. And then... Oh, my good God!' His shoulders sagged forward again.

'You saw the body—in the back of your car?'

He sat with his head in his hands. Charlesworth said quietly: 'Take your time. Finish your drink.' Etho sat very still, Rufie was staring like an idiot, demented: with slowly dawning realisation, Sari drew back and away from him. He said to her, mumbling through his spread fingers: 'How

could I know that the car I'd exchanged with was yours?"

"You dragged the body out of your own car and put it into hers?"

"Why does one do what one does?" he said. "I was shaken to the core. And always at the back of my mind—protect myself from scandal because of the child. I could have got it out and left it lying on the ground, I suppose, but—I don't know, someone might have appeared and noticed it, even from a distance—taken the number of my car as I drove away... God knows what thoughts flash through your mind... And there was this sort of vague idea that the body *belonged* with this other car, it was nothing to do with me, it ought to be where it belonged. So—nobody about, nothing could be seen from the windows of the flats. I got her out and pushed her in, head first, and went round and dragged her in from the other side. It was then that the rose must have fallen out of my buttonhole." He became aware of the whitening faces, the disgust and shock at the horror of the act. "I'm a doctor. I've been through it all as a student, the cadavers for dissection..." A half shrug, apologetic. "Dead bodies don't mean very much to me."

Before the onslaught of their incredulity should find voice, Charlesworth said quickly: "It was noon by this time. If they'd meanwhile taken the number of your car—with the body in it?"

"I'd have to face that if it arose. But it might not arise. The body was still there, it didn't seem as if anyone had seen it; maybe nobody had looked at the car since she left it there."

Sari spoke at last. She said: "Phin! You put Vi Feather, dead, in the back of my car? Mine!"

"I didn't know you then, Sari. You were just a strange female who'd left a dead woman in my car."

‘And you never said—’

‘I didn’t see the papers, I didn’t know it was you...’

‘You did this thing,’ said Etho, ‘and didn’t watch the papers to see what happened next?’

‘Well... The next day, Monday, I had an urgent call, I had to rush out of the house before the papers came. You don’t know what my work is like. You’re stuck there with a patient... And I didn’t want to go round making a fuss about seeing the papers. I got a look at *The Times*, at last, but there hadn’t been much time, a brief mention of a body being found—*The Times* doesn’t go into hysterics about film stars and so forth. I recognised the name of the girl in the film—but you’ve got to realise, I didn’t *see* the film, it was just a name to me. And then I was more and more frantically tied up—I couldn’t go running round buying newspapers, people would have thought it was odd, getting the sort of stuff I’d never read. And then I had to go to the pub, The Fox, to visit my patient there, and I met—her—there, Sari; and from that moment I was in love with her. I didn’t realise the girl I’d bumped into in the cinema was Sari Morne, and in the storm, I hadn’t even seen her face—at the tree, I mean. And by the time it all came together—I was in love.’ He said, half to himself, ‘And how could I tell her then—?’

‘You weren’t slightly suspicious—having found this body in the car she’d been driving?’

‘She told me about the Juanese,’ said Phin, simply. ‘Whatever it was all about—that seemed to cover everything.’

Rufie raised his white, clown’s face and spoke at last. He said, almost frantically: ‘Yes. That covers everything.’ For if Phin had found the body in the car that Sari had driven home—how had that body come to be in the car? He repeated: ‘The Juanese. That covers everything.’

‘We’ve been in touch with the Grand Duke of San Juan el Pirata,’ said Charlesworth. ‘The Juanese deny all knowledge of the affair.’

‘Well,’ said Etho, ‘but they would, wouldn’t they?’

‘And these letters,’ said Rufie, throwing out a hand to where they now lay in their neat plastic packages, on a table at Charlesworth’s side. ‘From San Juan. With the seal and everything; and the drawings...’

Squeals arose from behind the kitchen door that were not from Ronald Pig; a protesting male voice, the sounds of a scuffle, and Ena Mee burst into the room, Ginger scarlet-faced behind her. ‘I want to go home now! Ronald wants to go home!’ She rushed to her father grabbing at him with one hand, the wretched piglet hugged against her breast. ‘He won’t let me come out of the kitchen, Ronald’s finished his dinner but he won’t let us come out of the kitchen...’

‘We were playing nice games,’ said poor Ginger, protestingly.

‘I don’t want any more games, Ronald and I want to go home!’

Phin cast a look about him that implored, Be natural, don’t let her realise that anything’s up! and to Charlesworth flung out appealing hands. ‘I’ve told you now, there’s nothing more for me to say. And you know where to find me.’

‘You’re not going, Phin?’

‘I must take her home, darling. She’s tired, she... I must work it all out. God knows what now; but I’d just better take her home.’

‘Yes, take me home,’ wailed Ena Mee. ‘I want to go home!’

‘Yes. Yes,’ he said blankly. With the child still clinging to his arm, he turned towards Sari. ‘Understand, my darling!

I couldn't know it was your car.'

'No, no,' she said quickly. 'It was all the Followers. Mr Charlesworth knows now that it's true about them, it'll all come all right.'

Ena Mee tugged and whined. 'Daddy, come *on!*'

'All right,' said Charlesworth. 'Better get her home. I can see you again, later.'

'What on earth for now? I've told you everything, surely it's been bad enough?'

'There's still this niggle in my mind, that picnic basket and tarpaulin, packed in with poor squashed-up Nanny, when they might so easily have gone in the boot.'

'Oh, my God—not all that over again! There was masses of room, she was perfectly all right, the damn woman makes an injury out of everything. I simply folded up a small square of tarpaulin, put it in the corner, put the basket on top—a small basket, we weren't feeding the bloody zoo... Well, as it turned out,' said Phin, with a faint touch of humour, 'in fact we were but I didn't know that at the time.'

'So you didn't open the boot?'

'What did it matter? I just put them in beside her, it wasn't worth a thought.'

'No, I daresay not,' said Charlesworth. He was not in fact giving it any very serious thought himself; the experts swore that nothing, certainly no body in wet clothes, had ever been in the boot of the car. 'OK,' he said to the mizzling Ena Mee, 'off you go with Daddy!' Phin put out his hand and with never a backward glance at wonderful Sari who had given her Ronald Pig and all this marvellous day, she took it and they were gone. 'It'll be all right,' said Sari again. 'It was the Followers. You all know that now.' But her heart said: They haven't finished yet with Phin—and

was filled with dread.

You couldn't accept a drink on duty but Ginger had had a trying time and he knew a trick worth two of that and so did Mr Charlesworth. He appealed to no one in particular: 'Would it be possible to go to the toilet, please?'

'Um—yes,' said Charlesworth. 'I think I could do with the same.'

'There's one off my room,' said Rufie, indicating a door.

'I think a quick wee for me too,' said Sari, as soon as they were gone; but Etho caught her by the hand. 'And a quick slug?'

'You know I never touch the stuff.'

'OK, darling, let down your Image just for now! You need an occasional crutch like the rest of us—only, to keep it pretty, you keep it private. But it's only me and Rufie. Sit down again, and I'll give you a brandy.' Glass in hand, he moved to the couch where Phin had sat, and pulled her down beside him. He couldn't make it all out but he knew in his soul that things were going to get rough. 'Hang on tight,' he said to them. 'I'm afraid this isn't the end.'

Smelling unobtrusively of peppermint, the arm of the law returned. 'If we might sit down, Miss Morne?' Charlesworth collapsed into a deep armchair; Ginger looking round for something more suitable for a mere sergeant, could find only the bag of beans. Oh, well, he thought, the whole thing's such a bloody old send-up anyhow... Sari said: 'But it's all explained, I don't see what more there is to question. If you believe in the Followers, well you know they must have killed Vi Feather—like I keep saying, thinking it was me; and put her into Phin's car, thinking it was my car, and now we know how it got into mine so surely that's the end of it?'

‘It leaves that one rather big “if”, said Charlesworth. ‘*If I believe in the Followers.*’

‘You can’t ignore the letter that came today,’ said Etho. ‘From San Juan, stamped and sealed and the lot. And with the second sketch in it.’

‘They believe that she knows—’ said Rufie, roused from his lethargy of terror by the drink, ‘—and perhaps nobody else knows—that she did have a son by Aldo, and that this son would be Aldo’s heir.’

‘What would they care? The marriage was annulled, they’d regard the child as illegitimate.’

‘We’ve been into all that before,’ said Etho. ‘The marriage was in a Catholic church, the Duchess is a Catholic and anyway in these days, even the Grand Duke of San Juan el Pirata has to play it clever with Rome. No man is an island, and even an island isn’t an island any more.’

‘But the letters. And the sketches!’

Charlesworth reached out a hand for them. ‘OK, let’s take the letters and the sketches.’ He opened the plastic. ‘The first one. A blank envelope, pushed through the door.’

‘Sealed with the seal of San Juan,’ said Rufie. ‘Sealed with Aldo’s ring.’

‘From all accounts, anyone might have had in their possession Prince Aldo’s ring. Who saw the letter arrive?’

‘Sari and I did. It was pushed through, while we were sitting here.’

‘One of you deceiving the other. Both of you in collusion. It isn’t awfully convincing is it?’ said Charlesworth.

‘It never was,’ said Etho, easily. ‘They’re both gifted people, either of them could have done the sketch. And they’d both seen the body—only someone who’d seen the body could have done the sketch; most people would draw a

dead body just lying out flat.'

They bent upon him looks of horrified incomprehension. 'Etho, you never imagined—?'

'I just wondered,' said Etho. Charlesworth knew a lot by now and what he already knew, there was no sense in trying to hide. Give an air of frankness, don't seem to be guiltily trying to cover over. 'It was possible that Sari was just trying to build up her Followers. She never could get us to believe entirely in them.'

'Yeah,' said Charlesworth, comfortably; for nowadays he held almost all the trump-cards. 'Like that business about the car keys, that time at the pub. What about that, Miss Morne?'

'You mean, someone pinching Charley's car keys? In the loo there was this woman, all hairy—'

'Who saw the famous hairy lady?—only you. And there was a door from the car park to the ladies' room too, there often is in pubs. You just went through, and nicked the keys out of the dashboard. The way you people leave your car keys just hanging!' said Charlesworth, shocked to his professional soul; unaware of the spirit of admiration for all this easy carelessness, in which Charley had left them there.

'Why on earth should I take Charley's keys?'

'Oh, come on, Miss Morne! The mysterious Followers, up to their tricks again, everyone simply must believe in them now—because, as you say, why should *you* take the keys?'

Against his shoulder, Etho felt how she trembled. But they on their side, held a trump-card also. 'You can get round everything, Inspector, but you can't get round that letter that came this morning. Genuinely from San Juan. With the sketch in it. And sealed.'

'That's right,' said Charlesworth, equably. 'Only—when

was it sealed?

An envelope, genuinely posted; stuck down but with no seal. Ripped open along the top, the contents removed, replaced by the threatening sketch, hurriedly improvised; and upon the torn envelope, anyone in possession of the ring might affix the seal.

Into the bleak little silence, Etho said: 'Even so, it means nothing. She could be still trying to prove what she really believes—that the Juanese are after her.'

'Except that—what was in the letter, Miss Morne? Not what did you put into the envelope—what was in the envelope when it arrived?' And when, sitting shivering there, she made no answer he answered himself. 'There was a letter in it. I had one too.'

16

THE FINE, LARGE WHITE envelope, the copy-book, sloping continental script. Within, three pages of typescript, each page initialled at a corner, and the last page signed.

From: La Bellissima, Felicissima, Gran Duchessa di San Juan el Pirata. To Chief Inspector Charlesworth, Scotland Yard, London, England, 'Sir...

'Sir, I understand from our agent in England matters which I think it right to put straight. I therefore with the concurrence of my husband, the Grand Duke, dictate the following explanations.

'The marriage of Miss Sari Morne to our son, El Bienquisto, Aldo, heir to the Hereditary Grand Duke of San Juan, was annulled without consultation with her; and the information sent to her through the film company she worked for. No more was thought about it until, four years later, my son becoming betrothed, the vaults were searched for the family betrothal ring. El Bienquisto then confessed to having taken it for his engagement with Miss Morne and left it in her keeping. Our lawyers applied for its return, offering even to pay a price for it, but with all our efforts, we received no satisfaction. We were informed only that the ring was not in her possession. The ring is of very great value, to us of very great importance.

A young Italian agent was sent over to your country to try to make acquaintance with Miss Morne and her friends and discover if there might be any way of getting back the ring.

'The young man learned that she had worn it in the film in which she played a role. She wore it with the central

stone and the several additions which have each its own significance; but as she wore them all and patently not all of them could have relevant meaning, we accepted that, as worn by her, none of them need; it was all purely ornament.

‘Our agent telephoned us informing us that Miss Morne was going to Rome; in some vague hope of confronting her and asking her directly about the ring, I went myself to Rome. By his direction—it was thought less suspicious if he himself remained in England—the proprietors of the hotel where she was staying reported her movements to me and I learned that she was going with a friend to the convent of the Madonna dei Miracoli, out at Tarquinia, and I drove there hoping that in that atmosphere I might have my best opportunity to speak with her calmly.

‘You will have heard that—to my utter consternation—I saw her taking affectionate leave of a boy who might well be her child through her “marriage” with El Bienquisto, this island’s heir.

‘I could think only that the Mother Abbess of the convent must know something and I asked to see her...’

... asking to see her—asking to see Mother Abbess, a thousand compliments; if Mother Abbess would be so good, and without delay... The great blue eyes wide with a new terror, hands clasped rigid, lips grown white. ‘La Bellissima, Gran Duchessa di San Juan... Capisco? Duchessa di San Juan el Pirata...’ Bobs and curtseys, at once, Signora Duchessa, at once, at once; please to wait just one moment, doubtless Mother Abbess would receive the Signora Duchessa, without a moment’s delay.... The door of the chapel stood open, she went in and flung herself down on her knees before the painted statue, life-size, of Our Lady of Miracles. ‘Ave Maria, gratia plena—Mother of the Saviour, Friend of the Unfortunate, intercede with thy Son that this

terrible misfortune may not come upon us! Kindest and tenderest, not for a bauble, how should I trouble you with anything so material as that?—it is for our happiness I pray, for the happiness of those I love; for all the people, perhaps, of our island... Hope of the Helpless, hold out your hand to me; hold out your hand to your child in extremity, my heart faints within me, be merciful, give me a sign...!' All about her, hung around the walls, the abandoned splints and crutches, the surgical corsets, silvered over, touching and ludicrous, the strait-jacket over-all embroidered in gold. The veil flung over the marble head, of priceless, handmade lace; about the neck and wrists, pinned about the dress of rich brocade, crowning the blonde, painted head, the innumerable tributes of devoted and grateful hearts, giving of their best—jewelled tiara, chains, bracelets, brooches, rings—rubbish and reality, beauty, and crude, cheap ugliness, none the less moving for that.

The painted praying hands were crossed upon the marble breast; and among the glitter of small, chippy diamonds and rubies, the larger semi-precious stones—with a glow almost sombre in its depth and magnificence, worn proudly upon the tapering forefinger—the huge, many jewelled betrothal ring of the Hereditary Grand Dukes of the island of San Juan el Pirata, for all the world to see.

A curtsey at the door, a whisper. Mother Abbess would receive La Signora Duchessa; if la Signora Duchessa would please to come this way...

Sergeant Ellis, sitting waiting meekly in the hall, awaited his turn, followed her in. Quite how to behave towards an Italian religious, head of a great institution and quite evidently a very great lady in her own right, he hardly knew, but with his accustomed *savoir faire*, he stopped in the doorway and bowed. The Reverend Mother Abbess

inclined her stately head. He explained his identity, offered his credentials; outlined his errand. If, he said in his excellent, ill-accented Italian, Mother Abbess felt herself unable to help him, he must accept her discretion; but he felt that if she could, many problems for many people might be resolved. He bowed again and assumed an attitude of dog-like anticipation that would have sent Mr Charlesworth beresk with irritation.

Mother Abbess bowed back and indicated a chair. Certainly: the gentleman was perfectly right. The Grand Duchess of San

Juan had agreed with her that there should be no further secrets: the time had come to speak.

Four years ago. A young girl, fraught with many difficulties, work she was quite unused to, the heady courtship, the secret marriage, the realisation that one day she must face the rage of a father of whom even her husband was apparently terrified out of his life. The visits to the doctors, the recommendation of treatment in the clinic, here. For some weeks, a regular attendance, kept secret from the studios who would not be best pleased to find their starlet falling ill while they urgently needed her. And then, one day...

A nun, walking from the gardens to the front steps carrying a child in her arms; a child already ill, permanently crippled, mentally afflicted, abandoned at their door and taken in. The young man sweeping up in his brilliant sports car, driving as usual too fast, unable to turn in time... The nun falling, the child flung out of her arms...

‘He was weak, this young man—I saw it from the first; one cannot be a nun’, she said calmly, ‘without understanding something about character—one spends so much time finding out about one’s own. And I saw how

weak he was—a great, tall young man, magnificently handsome, very strong—but only physically strong. I didn't know then who he was, she used her stage name and we don't know much here, about what's going on in film studios in Rome. Now that I know, I understand. The father by all accounts is a frightening figure, taller and more handsome still, and strong also, but not only physically strong. A despot—benevolent, who knows?—but absolute ruler over his people, an enormously powerful, an intemperate man—and his son was afraid of him. He knew already that he would be in deep trouble when they found out about his marriage—and already I fear, he was growing a little out of love with this ailing girl, sick and wearisome. And now!—if the accident's reported, the police will arrive, the news of his marriage will be out; and what is more, if the Sister is badly injured, if the child is dead... The Italians and the Juanese don't very dearly love one another; and this may well be a criminal offence—and under Italian law. The girl jumps out and runs to their assistance. He calls out to her, 'Say nothing, they don't know my name!' and he drives away and leaves her there. And he leaves her entirely; flees home to his island and there, I suppose, confesses all to his parents and sits by while his father—only too thankful if he'll allow the marriage to be ended, gets him out of the whole dreadful mess.'

'And she?'

'The shock was appalling. But our Sister was not in fact seriously injured, we could never know that the baby suffered more as a result of the accident. She begged us, she implored us to say nothing; if we did, her husband could never again venture into Italy. At that time, poor girl, I suppose she thought that he would come back to her. But he didn't. Instead came a letter, via the studio, telling her that

the marriage was be annulled—the Grand Duke of San Juan el Pirata makes his own rules. A second shock, and it brought a relapse, we couldn't release her; what exactly was wrong, who could say? But at any rate, we agreed at last to keep it quiet. It was difficult; in law we were committing an offence ourselves, in not reporting what had happened, but our Sister expressed her forgiveness, what was the point of making trouble for everyone? So we kept her, and while she was here, she made a pet of the baby, I think she will never be sure in her own mind that his condition isn't partly due to the accident. At any rate she petted him and spoilt him, whenever she's in Rome, she visits him, she brings him gifts...'

‘And she’s paid for his keep,’ suggested Sergeant Ellis.

‘Ah—you’ve seen it too? At this moment, it’s being removed. I think she had no idea at the time of its value. I assure you that *we* knew nothing—who could believe that the thing was real? and nuns aren’t very familiar with magnificent jewellery. I think we imagined it to be some piece of costume jewellery for the stage. The Abbess of that day was perhaps a simpler person than I, and since some equally simple sister placed it on Our Lady’s finger, I’ve seen it only from afar and thought nothing about it. I may say that it now returns to San Juan. The Duchess offers us an enormous sum to compensate us; and I think Our Lady would wish us to take the money.’ She said with a small smile, ‘To be honest, I daresay she’s never greatly cared for it. It really is a bit much.’

‘You realise that all this time—?’

‘Only now do the Juanese understand that. Of course there has been no pursuit; just, in the last month or two, this young man sent over, to try to find out something, anything, about the ring.’

‘But *she* believed it. And with just one word—’

‘A wonderful girl,’ said the Abbess. She smiled again. ‘If she were older, it wouldn’t sound so foolish to say—a great lady...’

And not the only great lady, he thought; and bestowed upon her another of his bows, and went away.

‘... and the Grand Duke now understands that all this time the young lady has imagined herself to be in danger. By speaking out, she might have saved herself this—in fact non-existent—anxiety. I have written to her personally, telling her how deeply we appreciate that it was on account of our son that she kept silent, believing him to be still in danger from the Italian police—it is all now long ago, however, and they undertake not to prosecute. She thought also, perhaps, that the nuns having acted illegally in failing to report the accident, it might be supposed that they had accepted a bribe. I have paid my compliments, sir, to this young lady who in happier circumstances might have been our daughter.

‘This statement now closes. For your exact information, there have been no Juanese agents in your country—except in the past two months since El Bienquisto’s betrothal, the young man whom they knew as “Pony”, who however posed no threat to her, was instructed simply to discover what he could about the ring. She is now as she always has been, perfectly safe.

‘As to the death of a young woman and the mysteries surrounding it, reported to us by this agent, we can offer no assistance. We could have no interest in the matter and were in no way involved with it. It is for your information as to this as well as other matters, that we make this statement and most solemnly undertake that it is true.

Signed—'

Signed in the sloping hand that had addressed the envelope: Simone, Duchessa di San Juan el Pirata.

And under the signature an addendum, in the same sloping longhand. 'Please reassure the young lady as I have done in my letter to herself; there has never been any danger whatsoever to her and there is none now.'

Mr Charlesworth folded the papers carefully and put them back into his pocket. 'Poor dear lady,' he said. 'She means well. But you'd so much rather we could all still believe in your Followers—wouldn't you?'

But they *had* been there. They *were* real. The letters from San Juan, they were all lies. Yes, one had played tricks, put on acts to try to convince people, no one would believe, one had been so alone in the darkness because no one had believed.... But they had been there. It was not true to say that she had not been watched—they had been there always, in the shadows, watching her. Of course the Juanese would deny it all, that was easy enough, why admit it?—why admit to murder when from their safe distance they could simply write and say that they had no connection with murder?—had held no threat for her, that even when Pony had come to England, that had held no threat... And there you were!—*Pony* had been watching her, had been spying on her, had been deceiving them all, spying on them all, reporting back every word they said, ringing up the Grand Duchess in Rome—had she not been followed then? Nobody had believed that Pony was a Follower, but that hadn't been nonsense, so why should the rest have been?

Pony had been no threat to her—according to them, according to the letter from the Grand Duchess. But why should not Pony have been a threat as well as anyone else?

Had it been Pony following her that night, in the little black car?

But it had not been Pony. Pony had had an unbreakable alibi for that night, actually performing before all the people at that club of theirs—even the police had positively crossed him off.

It had not been Pony. That really had been the Followers.

The Followers. Through the black night and the storm, the little car following her, tracking her down; slowing down when she slowed, accelerating, maintaining its distance from her, tearing through the rain down the small dark country lanes from Wren's Hill towards home... A face, illuminated for a moment by a flash of lightening, dead white, peering out through the rain-spattered windscreen, two hands stretched forward, spread-eagled against the glass, two hands reaching out towards her, coloured to a ghastly crimson, as though they had been dabbled in blood...

Vi Feather, lying crooked and hideous in the back of the car, with her shiny pale blue plastic mac over the tawdry pink cardigan, and the cheap little woolly red cap all awry—and the cheap little woolly red gloves.

No Followers: only Vi Feather being driven home through the storm from the cinema, in a little black car. The same make and size, she had said to him that night, as Rufie's car...

As Rufie's car.

No Followers.

No Followers. No Juanese, frantic to recover the ring, to discover the significance of those inset gems surrounding the great betrothal diamond, rubies for the marriage, emeralds for a son, sapphires for mere daughters... No

Juanese with her murder in their minds. In her own mind, mists seemed to clear away, they had all been right, there had been no Followers ever, no Juanese; long ago in Rome, the sharp-faced men in sharp high-shouldered suits, eyeing her, had been just sharp-faced men in sharp suits, eyeing her; the watchers from the shadows, the cars nose-to-tail with hers—how long ago it seemed that Nan had suggested, just fellers trying to get another glimpse of so much gorgeousness! There had been no Followers; only, that night —two followers.

Just Vi Feather, in her red woolly gloves in Rufie's little hotted-up black car; and Rufie.

Rufie. 'Queer as a coot, I always thought meself,' Vi Feather had said, 'carrying on with Angelico, him that played your lead,' and, just to go a bit careful she had said to Vi, Angelico was a world star now, had made a prestigious marriage; it. could ruin him if a story like that got around. His whole appeal was to female audiences, his good looks and masculine virility....

Angelico, whom Rufie had loved and still deeply loved. 'You see, among our other unexpected qualities,' he had said to her, bitterly, 'we queers may even have fidelity...'

'You did but see him passing by - ?'

'And yet must love him, till I die,' Rufie had acknowledged sadly. What might Rufie not have done, to protect Angelico from Vi Feather's vicious, scandalmongering tongue?

17

IT WAS STRANGE AND almost horrible—the clearing of the old mist of terrors, leaving her mind so sharp and watchful, watchful not of imagined dangers but of threats immediate—threats to herself and Phin, to their future, to all her future, her last hope of happiness and peace. No Followers; no excuses any longer—real people, real motives, not necessarily concerning herself; real actions which might indeed concern herself.

For how had Vi's dead body come to be in the Halcyon, which anybody at a casual glance must suppose to be hers?

Back through the storm with the body of Vi, strangled, lolling in the front seat of the little black car; dragged out—and placed in her own.

And if Rufie could do that to her—to *her*... She said in a new voice, sharp and new: 'Rufie—what were *you* doing that night of the storm?'

'Me? I was at Etho's' said Rufie, surprised.

'Only for half an hour or so—quite late.'

He stared at her in amazement. 'Darling, what do you mean?'

'I mean that you had time enough to come back from Wren's Hill, leaving a bit early, getting past before the fall of the tree; and be at Etho's with a twenty-minute alibi.'

'He was with me much earlier than that,' said Etho, glancing uneasily between the two pale faces. Mr Charlesworth sat still as death in his deep armchair and prayed for them to go on forgetting that he was there.

'You said you only got back yourself about the same time. You admitted you'd driven Sofy down, and driven

back with her. And you did, because I remembered, on Sunday after the party, I remembered catching a glimpse of her there.'

'I was here in the flat, I kept ringing them up,' said Rufie, only vaguely protesting, hardly conscious yet of what was happening between them.

'But they weren't there to answer, they were down at Wren's Hill. So who knows that you really rang up? You only say you were here.' Now Charlesworth's presence did impinge itself upon them, they stopped dead, glanced at him horrified, looked away. Sari said at last, trying to turn it all aside, 'Oh, well, of course I don't mean anything.' To Charlesworth she pleaded: 'I keep doing this, I think of silly things and then everyone gets cross with me.'

'Not silly at all. You're suggesting, I take it, that Mr Soames killed the woman and transferred her body to what he supposed was your car?'

'Of course not, why should *he* want to kill her?'

'That needn't worry us at the moment. If he killed her, it must have been he who put the body in the other car?'

In a movement totally automatic, Rufie got up and crossed to the mantelpiece. Mr Charlesworth removed the white-painted pot from his hand. 'I think for your own sake, we'll take this one straight,' he said.

He seemed almost to come out of a trance. Etho said, 'It's ridiculous.' His mind moved swiftly, working it all out like a computer. 'All right, Inspector. We were all three down at the cinema. Sofy and Rufie and I. We didn't want to be seen, Miss Morne had asked us not to go, so we left early; we got by before the tree fell, we dropped Miss Burnsey off on the way and he and I came back here for half an hour or so.'

'Wouldn't it have been tidier just to let Miss Morne find

him waiting for her here at home?’

‘Not for me,’ said Etho, trying to speak lightly. ‘If he could say he’d been with me, that let me out too.’

‘Very neat. So he drove with you down to the cinema and back, in your car. How did he get from your place home to these flats?’

Rufie sat mute, paralysed. ‘He’d driven over to my place and left his car there, and then picked it up again to go home. Of course.’

‘Of course,’ said Charlesworth. He heaved himself out of his chair. ‘Might I use the telephone?’

They looked on helplessly. ‘Miss Burnsey? Chief Superintendent Charlesworth here. Just one question—that night of the murder: Mr Wendover is here with me. He now says that in fact he wasn’t at home till later—that he drove you down to the cinema—’

A pause. One could almost hear Sofy’s thoughts coming over, What is this, what am I to say, what will be best for him? But evidently Etho was admitting to it. She said rather cautiously: ‘Well—yes.’

‘And—did you drive back with him?’

This would obviously be the nitty gritty. If she had been with him, he could not have killed Vi Feather. ‘Yes, I did,’ said Sofy, much more confidently.

‘You and he together—just the two of you?’

Did he mean...? Was he suggesting, after all, that Vi Feather...? If Vi had been with them, if they had started off by giving Vi a lift—there was such a thing as collusion, they were known to be close friends and Vi a common—enemy. ‘Oh, yes,’ said Sofy, absolutely firmly this time. ‘Only Etho and me. Who else?’

Charlesworth put down the receiver, went slowly back to the chair. Rufie remained speechless. Etho said: ‘OK,

Inspector, it just seemed simpler to tell a fib—'

'Quite a fib, sir, if one may say so,' suggested Charlesworth, 'in a murder investigation. And one asks oneself—why? Because you can't help seeing that Miss Morne is quite right—the case against your friend is beginning to look rather positive.'

'Oh, Rufie, I didn't mean to suggest any case against you!' But if Rufie had put that body in her car—what he thought was her car—had placed his own guilt on to her shoulders... So close, so near, so loving and trusting, they two to one another—if he had done this to her...

'Mr Wendover, let's just get this straight. And no more lies, please, or I tell you,' said Charlesworth with quiet savagery, 'I'll get you for obstruction of the police in the performance of their duty—that isn't just bonking them on the conk, you know!—and After the Fact, and Before the Fact for all I know; the whole damn lot. So let's have it! You got back to your house, having dropped Miss Burnsey off at her flat—at what time?'

'I'd better explain to you, Inspector—'

'Please do,' said Charlesworth, with a touch of ice.

'—that we hadn't been in touch, we didn't know Rufie—Mr Soames—was going to Wren's Hill. He didn't make up his mind till the last minute, there was some do at this club he went to, and he couldn't decide. But we met him there, at least we saw him as we left, Sofy and me; and we exchanged guilty glances, jokey glances, and then we two came home. He was getting up when we saw him as though he were leaving too, and we looked out for him, but in the car park in all that storm you couldn't see a thing and it didn't matter anyway, we'd get in touch later. We drove home and I got back to my place about ten to eleven or a minute or two after that.' He paused. 'You wouldn't care to

check with Miss Burnsey?’

‘No,’ said Charlesworth. ‘Now that you know that I can do so, I don’t think I need to. But thanks, all the same.’

V-eeeery sarky! thought Ginger, with nothing to do but keep as still as one reasonably could, curled up like a small pork sausage in a large can of baked beans. It amused him very much when in crime stories, accompanying sergeants chipped in with intelligent questions of their own. It was an underling’s place to keep his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut.

‘So, having established your alibis—’

‘They weren’t alibis then,’ said Etho. ‘Why should they be?—we knew nothing about any murder. On his way past my place, and he actually passes the door, he stopped off to compare notes; it was the sort of thing we do all the time. He’d see my car and know I was back. Any element of alibi would be to deceive Sari. On my account, largely. Just say we’d spent the evening together. She’d asked us not to go.’

‘And why did you go?’

‘Me, personally? Well, my company still has an interest in her, I wanted to see how the film went, audience reaction to her. Sofy wanted to see her old self, Rufie wanted to see his dress designs... And he longed to know what we’d thought of it, so on his way home—’

‘Just a casual dropping in, then?’

‘I’ve told you. And you’ll hardly suggest’, said Etho, ‘that he’d casually drop in, leaving his car standing out in the road with a dead body lolling in the passenger seat? It’s a small car, no hiding place in it.’

Charlesworth shrugged. ‘Pushed to lie across the two seats, covered with a rug or something. Who’s peering into parked cars at eleven o’clock on a night like that?’

Eleven o’clock! Etho said slowly: ‘Inspector—Rufie left

my place soon after eleven. He wanted to be back before Sari got home. And he did get back before she got home, she'd been held up by the fall of the tree and he was already waiting for her in the flat. So—'

Rufie roused himself from his terrible lethargy, sitting strained forward in his chair, white hands grasping the arms, white face thrust forward. 'So,' he said, 'I couldn't have moved the body into the other car. The other car wasn't yet there.'

On the couch, Sari sat up very straight: very straight, very tense, the bright colours of the tight-fitted painted pants shifting under the soft, transparent over-all gleam of the flowing gown. 'Rufie?'

The thin, nervous white hands spread out, palms upwards, in a sort of appeal to credulity. 'Do you honestly think I could do such a thing—to her? Shift the blame from myself—to *her*? I could have—chucked it out somewhere along the edge of the heath, done anything, gone out afterwards, if you like, she always takes sleeping stuff, gone out by the Visitors' Stairs, taken the car out again in the dark and the rain, tumbled the body out somewhere. But for God's sake—not put it in her car...!' He said to her: 'It's all right, darling. Of course I didn't do it, God knows you'd never believe I'd do such a thing... Put the body in your car...!' And as her face grew ever more taut with fear, the great eyes gazing back to him in an agony of doubt, he cried, 'It's all right, darling, don't worry any more—I'm safe!'

But if Rufie was safe... Oh, my God! her heart cried out, what about Phin, what about Phin? The police 'would be seeing Phin again', were half suggesting that when he swapped with her car in the course of the Sunday picnic,

the dead body might have been in the boot of his own.

And she heard her own voice saying: ‘But of course then, Rufie, I told you about the exchange, I told you it *wasn’t* my car.’

To those that knew and loved him, it was as though a brush passed across his face, expunging the look of apprehension, relief—painting there instead of a terrible pain. He said in a dead voice; ‘Oh, Sari—!’

Etho left her side, went over swiftly and sat on the arm of the big easy chair, took one of the shaking hands in his own and held it, hard and comforting, as though it were a child’s. ‘It’s all right, Rufie, you’re all right, you’ll be safe.’

But he had forgotten his fears for himself. He repeated in that voice of bleak agony: ‘Oh, Sari—!’

‘I didn’t *say* anything,’ said Sari, but in her eyes there was something—terrible.

‘You said without saying it,’ said Charlesworth, ‘that rather than risk driving the body out, disposing of it somewhere which mustn’t be too close to home—it would be safer and more muddling, especially when you still had the Juanese to blame for everything strange that happened—for him just to go down the fire-escape outside his bedroom and—now that he knew it *wasn’t* your car—put the body into the stranger’s car.’

Now he became alive again to his own safety. ‘But I didn’t have any body in my car, I didn’t kill her, I swear, I swear, I didn’t have her in my car...’

That terrible look, that dead look in Sari’s eyes. ‘You did when you left Wren’s Hill,’ she said. ‘I saw you with her, following me.’

‘Following you?’ said Rufie stupidly.

‘Dodging me. Slowing down, catching up with me again —’

‘We weren’t following you, Sari. Just the other way about—I was trying to keep out of your sight.’ And realising what he had said, he fell against Etho’s arm and cried out, ‘Oh, my God!’

Charlesworth stood up. ‘I think Mr Soames, we mustn’t go on with this, here. I’m going to ask you to come with me to the police station.’

He clawed at Etho’s arm, clinging to him like a child. ‘I didn’t kill her. I swear I didn’t, I swear!’

‘She was in your car with you?’ said Charlesworth.

‘She started on about Angelico. He was... He wasn’t even gay, I just... She started in the cinema; to shut her up there, I agreed to drive her home. She went on and on. In the car, I mean; vile things, horrible things, so—ugly. And dangerous for him, such things being spread around about him. It made me sick, I thought I would go mad. I stopped and rolled a cigarette; I knew it was stupid, I’d already smoked that evening and when I’m hopped up I know I do crazy things. But I did and then I drove on and it was worse, her voice went on and on...’ He was white, shuddering, sobbing it all out at last. ‘And then there was a roar and a crash and I knew that behind us a tree had fallen and I thought of how it might have fallen on the car, I felt as if it had, as if the car was crushed and I was caged in with her there... I couldn’t bear it one moment longer, I just opened the door and pitched her out into the night. She ran after me, screaming at me but I slammed the door shut. A car passed me going in the opposite direction and I think I vaguely thought that they might pick her up but anyway I didn’t care, I just drove on, anything to get away from her voice going on and on... But I didn’t kill her. I just drove away and left her there.’ He had shifted from the shelter of Etho’s protection, came slowly to his feet, stood swaying.

He did not look at Sari. He said to Charlesworth, 'Yes, if I could come with you and you could write it all down? I think it would be—I don't know—cleaner.' Charlesworth put a hand on his arm but he shook it off. 'It's all right, I'm coming with you. I want to come.' Without a backward glance, he went with them. Sari fell against the heaped, wild cushions on the couch and burst into a storm of terrible tears.

Silence, silence in the big room, broken only by the sounds of exhausted sobbing. The room that Nan had admired in its clutter of beauty and a sort of mad utility, the lovely possessions, the drips of melted wax from the Batik work on Rufie's unfinished nightie, the patch on the rich carpet where someone had once spilt a bowl of spaghetti—brilliantly disguised ('All we can do is make a Feature of it, darlings, like they say in the magazines. Rufie, we could paint a little pond with a goldfish in it, visitors would always be carefully stepping over it, think it was a pool of water, though what could a pool of water be doing in the middle of a carpet?')—the sewing machine, pushed into a corner because of the party, but still on the floor—where once the famous Sofa-cover kaftan had been turned into a flowing blouse, bright with flowers, that Sari could wear to Rome for the especial enchantment of a half-witted crippled child... Etho went across and opened the tall windows to lean out and look down into the yard. 'They're taking him to the police car. He's walking between them. They're not holding him. I think he wants to go.'

She roused herself. He came across and offered her his handkerchief. She said at last: 'Will they believe him?'

'Of course not,' said Etho.

She got up and went herself and stared out the window

at the diminishing twinkle of the tail lights of the car; and standing there, framed in the autumn twilight, the soft evening breezes stirring the gossamer gown, the frame of hair the only touch of bright colour in all the softness, said: 'They've gone.'

'Yes,' said Etho, standing across from her as though some intangible obstacle held them, now and for ever, apart.

'What will they do with him?'

'They'll what is known as grill him,' said Etho. 'And you know, Rufie's such a very thin little slice of bacon, almost transparent, no substance to him; he'll grill easy.' She was silent. He said, still standing there, away from her:

'So, Sari—we can't let this go on.'

Her hands gripped the edge of the heavy curtains framing the tall window. 'What do you mean?'

'Darling—it has to be said at last. You've often said that I know you, I understand you. That's true. Solon turned me over to know you and understand you, you were precious to him in those days, he cared very much about you and for many reasons. So—it was my business to know you and understand you. To find out.'

Doom entered her panicking heart. 'To find out-? About *me*?'

'Your childhood was terrible, Sari; I've known all that. The wicked aunt—dragging you from one clinic to another all over Europe in search of her health... But it was *your* health, wasn't it?—your mental health, your emotional health. And then, suddenly, she died, too suddenly, I suppose, to have made arrangements for your guardianship, only leaving your money carefully tied up, but nothing personal for you, yourself. She'd come down to the convent in Tarquinia to die, and you were still there, being looked

after by the nuns. But you ran away and Solon found you and we arranged with them to offer you film work. They didn't like it but they had no control over you, all they could do was to try to explain to us as much as they dared—after all, these were your own personal problems—and promise you a refuge if ever you needed them...’

She stammered: ‘You've known all this?’

‘As much as they believed they should tell me, Sari. For your own sake. And of course things did begin to get too much for you, you went back to them, they got you to come to their clinic, psychiatrically they were treating you. But then Aldo ran away and the whole thing blew up in your face. It brought on a serious breakdown, they kept you with them...’

Her back was to the light, he could not see how her face for a moment softened. ‘They are angels,’ she said. ‘They make you believe in God.’

‘But you had to come away at last, you had to begin to live again. Solon valued you still, you might still have worked again—it was Aldo and all that over-excitement with Aldo that tipped the scales. And Solon valued you, as I say, he wanted me to watch you. I talked to the nuns, they thought I'd be understanding and take care of you. I encouraged you to come back to England where I could keep an eye on you—and I watched you. Secretly—you were like a forest creature that would scamper off out of sight if you were startled; you wouldn't stand being watched and controlled, they explained that to me. And I had no control over you, nobody had. I had to stand by helpless and witness the decline in you, Sari, the terrible decline. I encouraged the nonsense about Luigi, knowing that you went back each time to Tarquinia, saw your psychiatrist, got a new handhold from the love and

understanding—the overt, acknowledged understanding—of the nuns who had cared for you. But by then...’

‘By then it was out of their power to help me any more. Out of my own power. I couldn’t help *myself*.’ She said rather grimly: ‘And you knew that too?’

‘The lovely, funny great big painted safari-bags, Sari, the famous quick wees—into the public loos, stash away the empty bottles where nobody could know they were yours; now and again a quick dose too, when you were in need of one. “Gladdies” they call them at the moment, don’t they?—I suppose it was Gladdies you were still on, taken with alcohol. Vodka, not to smell too much on your breath. And the dartings into chemists’ for all that endless cotton-wool, how clever you were, turning it all into jokes against yourself, that distracted people’s minds from suspecting anything! Cotton-wool—and some Gladdies when you’d run out and couldn’t get to the shops on your own. But you had to go alone on your visits to the doctor, to half a dozen, dozens of different doctors, for all I know, to rip off a few forms from their prescription pads; it’s often not difficult and after all, you’re an adept at shop-lifting aren’t you? That wasn’t you Sari, once, not when we first knew you; but with the drugging the moral sense was going, stealing things was just a bit of fun.’ She was terribly still now, the pale, shimmering figure with the candle flame of her hair, but it had to be said, he ploughed steadily on. ‘Fill in the prescription for the Gladdies, perfectly innocent stuff on its own, only not to be taken with alcohol—all the poor bloody kids are using them these days... And all the time, the slow deterioration of character, my poor Sari, that comes with these things—breaking down, breaking down, never able to love for very long, exposing your inner self, not knowing you were doing so, to people who didn’t recognise or

understand but just—lost their love for you and drifted away. And now, my dear—there's nobody left but me.'

She mumbled, dry-mouthed: 'You said you would always love me, you said you would do anything for me.'

'And I have,' he said. 'Up to a limit—anything. I've let people suffer—I let you turn against Charley, I let you turn against Sofy, I let them suffer and only, behind the scenes, did what I could to help them; and I've let Rufie suffer. But —up to a limit. And neither I nor you can let Rufie suffer any more.'

Clutching at the long, heavy curtains, hanging on them, her slight weight tearing them slowly from the rails that held them. She stammered out: 'It was all... From the beginning ...It was the Followers.'

'It's been your obsession, my poor Sari. Out of God knows what childhood experience; I suppose they tried, all those psychiatrists, but they could never uncover it. That's why I loved you and stuck to you and tried to take care of you. It's been an obsession, you couldn't help it, all your life has been this escape from the Followers... All your "crutches"—the drugs, the whipped-up hilarities, the friends who might help you to forget until this something—almost terrible, in you, frightened them, though they didn't understand it, and drove them away. All the great loves who were going to save you and keep you safe for ever—culminating in Phin. You hadn't yet fallen out of your faith in Phin; you were afraid to the bottom of your soul that this murder business would lose Phin to you. Once they'd demolished the idea of the Juanese followers—'

'There were others,' she said in a strange, dead tone. 'Before and during—always. It wasn't just the murder, it wasn't just the Juanese. But tonight, something happened. If the Juanese followers had been all imagination—then the

rest might have been imagination too. And they *had* been imagination: that night, in the storm, they hadn't been Followers—only Rufie in his little black car and Vi Feather with red gloves on her hands...' The flat voice faltered. 'Red gloves, red hands, looking like—like...'

Like blood. Phin's car turning at the fallen tree and going on towards London. Vi Feather turned out by Rufie into the storm; creeping into the back of the car while they two crawled under the tree, stood exchanging identifications. Rising up behind her, those two bloody hands outstretched in explanation and appeal...

What had happened then? What had happened then? Blotted out, thrust deep down into the subconscious in the long engrained habit of thrusting out of sight the unwanted, the frightening, the thoughts one could not face, the memories unendurable...

The shuddering halt of the car, the mindless reaction: fighting off the bleeding hands, forcing it all down out of her sight... The mindlessness, driving on through the storm while oblivion closed in over it, buried it deep down in the matrix of a total forgetfulness, that even later recognitions would not bring to the surface. Driving home, stopping the car, leaving it without a moment's further thought, just as one would have done anyway, keys swinging in the ignition, dashing through the rain to the warmth and comfort of home, to Rufie, to safety—safety from the Followers. Nothing, nothing left in the conscious mind but the old obsessional fear of the Followers. But the Follower had been Vi Feather with her bleeding hands... And she was falling, falling... An aeroplane falling, tumbling out of the sky, they were screaming, tumbling all about and screaming, Mummy and Daddy were clutching at her, screaming... And the thunderous jolt and the breaking apart and the all-

obliterating explosion—and the flight from the nightmare of red flame shot through with yellow and blue, blazing, blazing up as high as the sky... And the blackening figures dancing and screaming among the flames. Running away, running away, saving herself, leaving Mummy and Daddy dancing and screaming in the flames, burning, burning—

Mustafa

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